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Two Case Studies on the Micropolitics
Between Art, Gentrification, and Agency

Dahlia El Broul

Taking Root Without Taking Over

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Between Art, Gentrification, and Agency

Master's Thesis by

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For the Arfins

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Abstract

Is there a way to act together in cities that are increasingly dividing us? Many see artists and galleries as a bellwether for the first wave of displacement of low-income individuals and families in economically vulnerable communities. This MA paper examines how cultural institutions—including galleries and universities—play a role in gentrification, through a qualitative research methodology, using two neighbourhoods as case studies, and by interviewing five locals from each district. The thesis seeks to go further than a moralistic binary of separating good from bad practices—instead cultivating ways to address the various entanglements and contradictions within gentrification processes, and of cultural workers, who find themselves at the intersection of agency and precarity.

The first locality I examined was Boyle Heights in Los Angeles, USA, where arguments made by rooted residents dragged art spaces out of the sanctum of tacit valorisation. Here a clear politicised conflict exposed art and the cultural spaces of display/inquiry, as neither harmless, neutral, nor apolitical. Mechanisms of inclusion and exclusion become the framework for a subtle and gradual encroachment in Nord Holland, Kassel, Germany, the second area of my research. I wanted to go beyond using the two locations as a comparison, to preferably laying out on the table the multitudes of solidarities, fractures, traumas, and contradictions.

The study raises questions of the unseen ripple effects by artists—flows of normalising or disrupting, devaluing or inflating, reverberations that are not felt sometimes for decades—asking how can we make the distinction between practices that enrich the community, and those of exploitation and extraction. How can artists and educators address our ability to take a political stand when material reality cannot remove itself from institutional entanglements. From the perspective of an artist, educator, and researcher, this paper engages in the possibilities of another future relationship to spatial usage—seeking solidarity with a community by working with existing structures to address relationships between art, culture, and displacement.

Keywords: accountability, agency, artistic practice, community, contemporary art, development, displacement, education, gentrification, knowledge production, precarity, racism, solidarity, vulnerability.

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I wish to thank my mother, Alyce Broul, who has always provided me with both emotional and intellectual support, as well as the rest of my beautiful family and friends, for their encouragement and advice along the way. Finally, a tremendous thank you to my partner in life, Jarrod Gecek, who helped me design this book, and whose love and wisdom are with me always.

Foreword

I see what I'm writing as part of a wider claiming which is beginning.
 I am part of the difficulty myself. The difficulty is not out there.
 Sheila Rowbotham, *Beyond the Fragments*, 1981

I began my professional career as a children's book illustrator; the work would be sparse and extremely competitive. Together with my artistic practice, I worked as an art educator; this occupation was equally challenging but less elusive. Living most of my life in New York City—and teaching a number of students from a variety of backgrounds—exposed me to a plurality of struggles. Reimagining the conventions of thinking about community through this work, I began to give myself permission¹ to take a side (politically or socially) when I felt it necessary, hence preparing a journey examining my role as an artist/teacher in dialogue with community. But who was I actually speaking to, and what meaning did my presence in the classroom create? In coming from a working class background, yet always managing to access varying levels of upward social mobility, I could see my own tangled relationship between privilege and activism. I had been joining social justice causes since I was in high school but I increasingly became mired by political frustration and slowly lost steam.

It is in the process of listening and relistening, and through extensive research, that I re-ask myself critical questions that affected my activism in the first place; one being my role as a gentrifier and the other being the broader ways in which cultural producers and I could act differently. While writing this thesis, I was in pursuit of assuaging my own desire and not the protocol of political correctness—which Claire Bishop evaluates as a “position of doing what seems right in the eyes of others.” The art historian and critic suggests taking

“responsibility for [my] own desire, rather than acting out of guilt”² when thinking about collaborative artist practices—I think it can also guide a praxis of education pedagogy. My thesis operates as a heteroglossia, by positioning the voices of interviewees alongside my own thoughts and interpretations—this, of course, is not to say they are speaking “neutrally,” I understand that my perspective filters and guides their words. Yet, my aim is also not to reconstruct these words to fit my own conceptual or theoretical framework. I am interested in the process of deep listening, recording, transcribing and incorporating, while also being aware this is a practice in need of care and sobriety. I still don’t know what it means to listen deeply. Perhaps it comes from “this striving in concert or this striving together that seems to form one meaning of political movement or mobilization.”³ I have learned a great deal from this project, from all the people that have shared their time, meals, disciplines and ideas with me and from Nora Sternfeld, my thesis advisor, who continues to shape my ever-evolving understanding of praxis. In one of her pithy aphorisms that she so effortlessly relays, she said to me, “whatever we learn makes us and whatever we make, makes something thinkable.” I hope what I have wrote here will do just that.

Notes

1. Professor Irit Rogoff, from Goldsmith University, asked my class in a guest lecture “what do you give yourself permission for?” It has always stayed with me as an essential, personal and professional, question.
2. Roche, Jennifer. “Socially Engaged Art, Critics, and Discontents: An Interview with Claire Bishop.” in: Holly Crawford (ed.) “Artistic Bedfellows. Histories, Theories, and Conversations in Collaborative Art Practices,” Lanham, Maryland: University Press of America, 2008, p. 206.
3. Butler, Judith. “Notes Toward a Performative Theory of Assembly.” Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2015, p. 133.

If the experience of art is sublime, it looks as if it can be
sublimely independent of a lot of other values.

-John Berger, *Ways of Seeing*, 1972

Introduction: Naming Where We Are and Where We are Not

I am aware of moments, not days.

-David Perlov, *Diary Part 1 and 2, 1973 - 1980*

I grew up in 1980s New York, living in the city while witnessing the accelerated processes of gentrification and disenfranchisement. These so-called “urban renewal” or “revitalisation” projects were merely euphemisms for the expulsion of socially and economically vulnerable groups for the benefit of wealthy investors (as the nomenclature gentrification intimates). Many see artists and galleries as a bellwether for the first wave of displacement of low-income individuals and families who require affordable housing. They see developers privileging certain amenities, and rebranding districts as “up and coming,” “green” or “artistic.” Young creatives and tech-workers formulated the “creative class,” a term popularised by urban studies theorist Richard Florida—tasked to revive the cities of the future, economically. This class of diverse, artsy, and highly-educated workers would drive new industries with the influx of wealth and creativity—moreover generating wealth for developers.¹ However, this relationship between art and the processes of gentrification are old topics. One only has to read *The Fine Art of Gentrification*, by Rosalyn Deutsche and Cara Gendel Ryan, to see that some people were already taking a stand against “artists’ housing” to fight their assimilation into market speculation in 1987.

In 1964, sociologist Ruth Glass coined the term “gentrification” after observing the process of working class quarters being invaded by the middle and upper middle class by renovating rundown buildings, eventually displacing its poorer longtime residents.² Historically, nascent stages of gentrification in NYC were done by architects who

transformed blocks of row houses and abandoned mansions into high-income apartment buildings.

In 1908, New York City architect Frederick Sterner became perhaps the first “gentrifier” in the city when he renovated an East 19th Street rooming house that he had purchased in the Gramercy Park neighborhood and from which he had evicted the residents. Sterner’s renovation was so successful that architects began to emulate him by remodeling run-down row houses in Gramercy Park, Murray Hill, East Midtown, Treadwell Farm, and Lenox Hill[...]By the end of the 1920s, most of the row houses of Manhattan’s East Side once home to the poor and working class now housed wealthy owners and renters.³

In 2014, the term “artwashing” was first popularised in mainstream media by journalist and writer Feargus O’Sullivan. Compared to how corporations use environmental initiatives to “improve their image via “greenwashing,” “artwashing” similarly adds a “cursory sheen” to otherwise classically profit-driven endeavours.⁴ The struggles are so globalised that *The Guardian* has an entire online section titled *Gentrified World*,⁵ an ongoing directory chronicling tales of gentrification—objectifying the already objectified.

Universities in NYC also have a symbiotic relationship with the processes of displacement—part of economic, political, and social agendas which extensively restructure the economy and the landscape.⁶ The two largest private landowners in the city are New York University (NYU) and the Trustees of Columbia University. Third in line is Deutsche Bank National Trust.⁷ I was amazed by these numbers, partly because I was under the supposition that it’s normal for banks to be at the top of lists of wealthy institutions, but that two universities managed to exceed even the wealth of a bank was eye-opening.

I grew up in different affordable housing structures and models in Manhattan, and I went through the public education system

until graduating from high school. But the possibility of raising my children in the same manner would be extremely challenging, mainly because the stock of affordable housing continues to decrease.⁸ I've witnessed this massive socioeconomic shift in precarious communities firsthand. I've seen friends and family priced out of a city they helped make brilliant and multifarious, myself included. I can understand when activists take action and call for development that enacts unquestionably necessary infrastructure for working class and economically distressed communities (i.e. laundromats or affordable grocery stores) over galleries or new wings to a university, which use axiomatic language for tacit absolution.

You could also argue that higher incarceration rates in the US account for a large proportion of population displacement.⁹ One example is the Rockefeller Drug Laws (a broad governmental initiative known as the War on Drugs but widely understood as the War on the Poor.) These policies lead to a significant rise in incarceration and consequently to the displacement of low-income families and people of colour. It's just one link in the gentrification chain that has positioned NYC as a location of accelerated, targeted, and racist structures of dispossession since the mid 1970s. The prison population increased five times, from around 300,000 in the 1980s to 1,500,000 by 2011 nationwide.¹⁰ In 1985, my father was incarcerated for a petty drug crime. I wouldn't see him again for 10 years.

*

When storytelling or giving advice to friends, I tend to start in the middle—connecting disparate ends to disjointed thoughts which have to then circle back around for any comprehensibility. For my research, I decided to similarly act from the middle and work my way through—going to the centre, then out, and back again, like a child's drawing of a daisy. This is a point of entry that Irit Rogoff uses within theoretical discourse, wherein she connects the working

methodologies of NGOs to that of cultural practices, such as curating or artistic research. The writer and theorist contends that NGOs start at the centre of a problem and a space of urgency where “there is little preoccupation with either allocating the blame for who created it or who is blocking the possibilities of resolving it, and, instead, an active network of micro gestures begins to reshape the landscape.”¹¹ To start in the middle is to be aware of problems without managing to untangle both the causes and the conditions for a resolution from the outset—it is a possibility for something to emerge from the echoes.

Methodologically, I give myself the permission to act and react, “not to rehearse the entire structure of the argument and its history, but to go along with it and make it operate differently, operate in our time,”¹² as Rogoff states. Even if this means getting lost along the way. However, by “lost” I don’t mean losing one’s focus, but in understanding that even though you may never find concrete answers, it doesn’t mitigate one’s resolve in asking questions and continuing a dialogue with all actors situated within a certain set of arguments. Lost, in this sense, is when you allow yourself to lead and be lead. As an opening, I am lead by Rogoff’s account of NGOs as typically positioned on ever-shifting terrain of issues. She suggests that they do not assert a virtuous high ground by making promises of a finer future, instead “they can claim processes that unpack, make visible, intervene, support, and lend an ear and thus produce a critical language for the urgent issues of the day.”¹³

What do I think is the urgent issue of my day? There are many, but I had an “aha” moment after months of thesis indecision when reading an article in *Hyperallergic*, an online publishing platform and “forum for serious, playful, and radical thinking about art in the world today.”¹⁴ This article, by local Los Angeles journalist Matt Stromberg, was a powerful exposé on a recently closed nonprofit art space named PSSST. Located in the working class neighbourhood of Boyle Heights, anti-gentrification activists in the community demanded

its eviction and the removal of all other galleries. They insisted these spaces be replaced with “authentic affordable housing for low-income people, emergency housing for homeless people and people displaced by gentrification, a laundromat, a needle exchange or harm reduction center, an affordable grocery store, etc.”¹⁵ From the terrain of this contested space I drew my question—“if art is implicated in gentrification processes, how could it be in solidarity with existing structures and people?”

Blood is a good glue.

- Narimane Mari, *Le Fort Des Fous*, 2017

Following Jean-Luc Nancy, I navigate my solidarity tasked with “being in common,” instead of “having in common.”^{16,17} This claim guides the next case study I intended to research, and that is a district of Kassel, Germany, called Nord Holland, or Nordstadt (North City) as it is referred to by locals. Internationally known as “documenta City,” Kassel boasts of its quinquennial art show, recognised as one of the most important exhibitions in the world. I worked there in the summer of 2017 and can—in part, if only personally—attest to its broad significance, influence and effect. This year, more than 10 official venues were placed in Nordstadt, an act of affirmation towards this area in Kassel that is commonly ignored by tourists but one with a long history of cultural diversity. documenta characterises this juxtaposition—“Whereas Mitte [centre] is the comparatively homogeneous commercial and cultural hub of the city, Nordstadt is where Kassel becomes home to Turkish, Ethiopian, Bulgarian, and other migrant communities based there since the 1960s and ’70s, as well as those who more recently arrived from Syria and the Middle East.”¹⁸ When thinking about gentrification, I thought, “okay, documenta is expanding into this working class community, what will happen to the residents? What have been the effects of this

mega exhibition on the city, and more recently in a district where distinct precarious populations converge?” “Being in common” is neither about sharing blood nor nationality. It is not even about a fight in which I am personally embedded. It is about a fabric woven together—solidarity through conviviality and political alliance, rather than homogenised subjectivities. I mean that at whatever distance I may be in relation to a particular struggle, I conjointly stitch in my own solidarities—for me, this comes from both a practice of coherence and by forming relationships.

How can we address our own complicity within the gentrification process when there is no neutral vantage point or ground to stand on? As an educator now researching gentrification, I am part of the field of struggle and a participant therein—Nora Sternfeld clearly points out, at the liminal stage of my work, that gentrification is the topic by the gentrifiers.¹⁹ Thusly, how can we enact ways of thinking and behaving that weaken these systems? My framing of the areas of Boyle Heights and Kassel as vulnerable or precarious populations is problematic, in the sense that I understand it can collectivise the experiences of many distinct people. Populations are vulnerable and precarious but not without agency—these conditions must be thought about together if we are to constitute political struggle and find solidarity.

I am not trying to define these groups by their vulnerability, as such. Vulnerability or the struggle against precarity “is neither to position precarious populations as hyper-responsible on a moral model nor, conversely, to position them as suffering populations in need of ‘care’ by good Christians.”²⁰ My approach comes from Judith Butler and “takes vulnerability and invulnerability as political effects, unequally distributed effects of a field of power that acts on and through bodies.”²¹ The overwhelming entanglements within these mechanisms of subjugation can cause a kind of apathy. I believe this ability to be apathetic is another characteristic of privilege. Because only in a position of privilege can one decide to think about something else,

move somewhere else or receive support, whether financial or social, and continue to climb the ladder of upward social mobility. We should think about the relationship between racism and displacement more, as well as the correlation between the desire for diversity and heterogeneity, along with symbolic capital and symbolic inclusion when no political changes occur.

In her book *Good Neighbors: Gentrifying Diversity in Boston's South End*, Sylvie Tissot argues that this call for diversity will typically stem from the gentrifiers themselves, full of good intentions and liberal politics. The French sociologist and activist explains, by looking at the case study of the South End in Boston, Massachusetts, that this diversity is only allowed through the controlled development and interests of dominant white elites, those with access to financial and social capital. Mechanisms of inclusion and exclusion become the framework for a subtle and gradual encroachment, hardly perceptible in the nascent stage, yet immutable by the time the real gentrifying signifiers are perceptible (typified by high-end coffee shops or boutique pet supply stores). American author and journalist, Ta-Nehisi Coates asserts there is no gentrification, only racism or structures reinforced through an underlying racist hegemony. "And I feel it not just because of the black people swept away but because I know that 'gentrification' is but a more pleasing name for white supremacy, is the interest on enslavement, the interest on Jim Crow, the interest on redlining, compounding across the years, and these new urbanites living off of that interest are, all of them, exulting in a crime. To speak the word gentrification is to immediately lie."²²

Without a vision for tomorrow, hope is impossible.

-Paulo Freire, *Pedagogy of the Heart*, 1998

I started out wanting to know how cultural institutions played a role in displacement. I sought to go beyond using the two locations of Boyle Heights and Nordstadt as comparisons and to instead to see them as examples; to preferably lay out the multitudes, solidarities, fractures, traumas and contradictions within the struggle of each place. Aiming to go beyond a moralistic binary by separating good from bad practices, I instead wanted to address the particular and specific embodiments of various actors including the persons I interviewed and myself. To do this, I spoke to people in some way tied to either of these two communities, as well as individuals whose works relate to the topic of gentrification. Interviewing a total of 10 people, I was not interested in performing a scientific position of neutrality. Instead, I was inspired towards a feminist objectivity, broadened by feminist technoscience scholar Donna Haraway, called “situated knowledge”—where she argues for an unmasking of “the doctrines of objectivity because they [threaten] our budding sense of collective historical subjectivity and agency and our ‘embodied’ accounts of the truth.”²³

I started with a split position by asking, “Whom to see with?” Intent on structuring this “seeing” through, loosely sketched-out and imperfect mappings of structures and tensions within the “charged polyphony” of lived experiences. How are the “practices of domination” being enacted in these two districts? Who are the people I should speak to in order to grasp this better? In understanding Haraway, I would need a “joining of partial views and halting voices into a collective subject position that promises a vision of the means of ongoing finite embodiment, of living within limits and contradictions—of views from somewhere.”²⁴ This meant that no view was an absolute truth and, by amassing all these different and diverging subjectivities, I could reveal many truths. This methodology

allowed for a levelling of any one position of power.

Michel Foucault repeatedly refers to genealogies as a “combination of erudite knowledge and ‘what people know.’”²⁵ He defines “what people know” not as “the same thing as common knowledge or common sense but, on the contrary, a particular knowledge, a knowledge that is local, regional, or differential, incapable of unanimity and which derives its power solely from the fact that it is different from all the knowledges that surround it.”²⁶ How I understand the claim to combine marginalised knowledge (Foucault expresses it as “memory confined to the margins”) and scholarly knowledge is not to make a new hierarchy and reproduce the structures of hegemony. Instead what people know serves to rupture genealogies because “they are about the insurrection of knowledges... an insurrection against the centralizing power-effects that are bound up with the institutionalization and workings of any scientific discourse organized in a society such as ours.”²⁷ I too bear a particular knowledge and it is important for me to make those experiences visible alongside those of my interviewees. The integrity of the conversations will be considerably affected by my own voice, by virtue of my writing this text and assembling their voices, and my own inability to consistently keep a clear and objective writing position. This doesn’t undermine the work but makes a point of addressing the impossibility for knowledge to be anything but situated.

Naming where we are and where we are not

In endeavouring to understand the often abstruse condition of gentrification today, it became increasingly more slippery when thinking of my own position. Situated knowledge is what people know—what did I know, of displacement, or loss? One day, I woke up and my father was gone. I don’t remember ever asking any questions

about the missing... a black spot on my memory. Perhaps months or years later there was a phone call, he was now an architect who had moved away and would return when things were better. More of an explanation would not come for many years. There was a condition in my family of not speaking to hardship or trauma. It was ignored until simply, forever. As a case in point, I have no idea how old my mother is, she refuses to tell me. Year after year, I imagine that she is either getting older or miraculously younger. I think this cognitive dissonance, preserved by most of my relatives (at least, on my mother's side of the family, with whom I grew up), is our answer to the impossible task of living.

Demander l'impossible pour avoir tout le possible
(Demand the impossible in order to get all that is possible)
-Henri Lefebvre, *Conversation avec Henri Lefebvre*, 1991

You must choose. This is the dilemma confronting my 19-year-old self, pacing the hall outside my *Introduction to Comedic Literature* course after receiving an unexpected call from my mother; a crumbling voice migrating through an invisible frequency, demanding the impossible—choose sides, between her or my father over some financial issue they were having. When we feel threatened, our most primal selves emerge. Nevertheless, how to think through this initial jolt; how can I calm the ever-defining volume of a hysterical mother's voice? Who has the right to make a claim, over a person or over a city?

In the present day neighbourhood of Boyle Heights, in Los Angeles, California, USA, protesters call for all galleries to get out. This polarizing method—marking fixed positions within what is really an intersectional struggle—seems deliberate. It's as if the stakes have risen too high for negotiation. Have we really reached our collaborative limits? Organisers might claim those strategies have already been co-opted by neoliberal structures, instrumentalising, once again, the

*polis*²⁸ to work against its own interests. What is at stake when you are asked to choose, between parents, between communities, where do you belong and to whom? The ever-shifting lines of conflict seem to dance further from their antecedent stages, expanding and settling on shaky ground. How can we recognize with which side to align ourselves? Must I accept the lack of options for parity presented as immutable? I do not regret it, the decision that day over the phone to choose my mother's interests over my father's, but sometimes I wonder what tiny seeds it left in me. Did it bud into willful neglect and indifference towards my father or leave a pernicious mark on my relationship with her? Maybe it is what allowed me to revoke his invitation to my wedding, or hardly visit his apartment, with my two half-brothers and stepmother in Brooklyn, whenever I return to New York. What alters in ourselves when we do take a side, and how can we come to terms with this choice years later.

[Art] can be constructed as a bridge among
people, communities, even countries
-Suzanne Lacy, *The Name of the Game*, 1996

As a hope, as a possibility, and as an ambition, I agree with the sentiment of this quote by American visual artist Suzanne Lacy. Effectively, I do not see this as the result of many artist practices—only as the criterion of which we should pursue. I am not suggesting that art is not doing any bridge-building in general, but I question who it will connect. I would like to explore how this construction can be seen as the framework for a long-term structural shift. Not only as an overpass to cross from one side of subjugation to another—of art with subjugation—or the structure that allows greed to look over the bannister and admire its clean reflection. The growing mistrust of the public towards the “art-world” is extremely complex, yet in some instances straightforward, especially when untangling the structures of cultural funding. In July 2014, Boycott Divest Zabludowicz

Group published an essay tying the wealthy, London-based, family's art patronage to Palestinian genocide in occupied Israeli territories. As they state, "the Zabłudowicz's historical involvement in the arms trade is absolutely relevant to their present role in BICOM [Britain Israel Communications and Research Centre] and their whitewashing through the art market. It doesn't matter that they've 'divested'; selling up and then switching the values that they 'earned' through mass slaughter into 'culture' doesn't mean that it's somehow unacceptable to accuse them of complicity in mass death."²⁹ A more recent example is the Purdue Pharma side of the Sackler family, who are major funders to dozens of universities and museums around the world. Yet, the family and the institutions continually conceal the fundings connection to Purdue Pharma's opioid medication. The company has now infamously been exposed for hiding the addictive effects of OxyContin—a drug their company invented—for decades, contributing to the current opioid epidemic, and thousands of deaths due to overdose in the USA.³⁰

The argument is not that we don't want or need art, as a matter of fact, we do need these spaces, but I propose we need them demystified and accessible. You can't have it both ways, having access to exclusive and elusive funding while being radical, open and socially-engaged. There must be more coherence in praxis and accountability. A line must be drawn when art profits from certain structures of oppression and murder because it can not claim social weight when it exists off the death of "expendable" socials. How can we look at such a contradiction head on and say "no"? It's true that precarious working conditions, fed by notions of scarcity, have cornered us (even pitted us against each other and our own interests), but there are ways of disrupting the ever-growing mechanisms of wealth creation/hoarding fed by an expanding cultural field brimming with self-validation and justification. I propose, through my research question and methodology, to try and untangle some of these oppositions and contradictions which prevent us from being fully engaged as activists.

For space is never empty: it always embodies a meaning.
Henri Lefebvre, *The Production of Space*, 1974

To talk about displacement we must begin by talking about place. Boundaries are not only framed through state rationalised postal code zoning, but are additionally constituted by “the everyday struggles that go into producing those boundaries”—to quote Nicholas De Genova³¹—such as class, sexuality, race, gender, disability, age and language. Cities are places where social life develops most vigorously and where space is “produced,” along with the production of spatial difference.³² In his book, *The Production of Space*, Henri Lefebvre theorised a “conceptual triad” of “socially produced” space: spatial practice, representations of space, and representational space. Spatial practice can be seen as social places where repetitional activities occur, like a market square, a street corner or an office. “They correspond to a specific use of that space, and hence to a spatial practice that they express and constitute.”³³ Representations of space are conceived by city planners, architects or bankers. They are bound to “the relations of production and to the ‘order’ which those relations impose, and hence to knowledge, to signs, to codes, and to ‘frontal’ relations.”³⁴ Lastly, representational space is “linked to the clandestine or underground side of social life, [as] also to art.” Man cannot live without the imaginary, for Lefebvre it is part of urban space. The imaginary “produces” space.³⁵ They are the creative ways in which the functions of place have been appropriated into alternative meanings and usages. As urban studies theorist, David Harvey explains in *Spacetime and the World*, the three concepts refer “to the way we humans live—physically, affectively, and emotionally,” further describing them as “materially sensed, conceptualized, and lived.”³⁶

In *La Droit a la Ville* (*The Right to the City*), Henri Lefebvre argued that space is always contested. The right to the city is enacted on its streets as a “cry and a demand” within social, political, and economic

struggles³⁷—not the auspices of legal entitlements. Journalist and writer, Anna Minton, drawing on Lefebvre, argues that his conception of *The Right to the City*, rested on the daily experiences of people inhabiting it. Lefebvre emphasised use value over exchange value,³⁸ utility over market worth—she asserts—and makes the contemporary connection that the present relationship between the two is broken. “Today, in almost every city in the world, the property rights of owners trump the use rights of inhabitants and exchange value, which views the spaces of the city primarily as places for investment, is dominant.”³⁹

Interpreting the term “right,” not in a legal sense but in a political and ethical sense, David Madden and Peter Marcuse see Lefebvre’s position not as “proposing a right to the city as it currently exists, but the right to a transformed city, and the right to transform it.” This right to transform the city has inspired groups such as Right To The City Alliance (RTC), who emerged as a call to interrupt the process of displacement and ecological decimation—gathering people not because they have a legally enforceable claim, but precisely because they are the precarious populations who may or may not have juridical standing. In tackling the current struggle for housing and environmental justice, we can see how activists have affirmed that people do not only live in the security of private spaces. They also share and occupy daily social spaces; imagined, constructed and appropriated spaces within a social fabric—making a claim to the right to do so and to contest any space as “given.”

Space is made and taken. “The Right to Stay Put,” as Chesteror Hartman conceived, is part of a radical shift in housing rights to support “those in the society who fall at the lower end of the spectrum of resources and power.”⁴⁰ As Madden and Marcuse elaborate, “housing and urban development today are not secondary phenomena. Rather, they are becoming some of the main processes driving contemporary global capitalism. If Lefebvre is right, housing

is becoming an ever more important site for the reproduction of the system—a change that might open new strategic possibilities for housing movements to achieve social change.”

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Los Angeles: Complex Entanglements

Boyle Heights: An Incomplete History

Boyle Heights, a neighbourhood of nearly 100,000 residents known for its taco shops, Mariachis, low-income housing, family businesses and service workers, is located across the river from the lofts and skyscrapers of downtown Los Angeles, California. In the late 1980s and 1990s it was also notorious for gang violence, a time called “the decade of death” by local priest Father Greg Boyle.¹ His outreach efforts began decades ago with Homeboy Industries—a nonprofit organisation that supports and trains formerly incarcerated and gang-involved people, some of whom are homeless, and all of whom are low-income. Boyle Heights is one of the poorest working class neighbourhoods in Los Angeles county. As of 2012, residents earned an annual median income of \$18,000. Its characterised by a mostly Latinx population (73%), with 8% Non-Latinx White, 14% Asian, 3% Black, and 1% Other, comprising the remainder. Considering the homogenous nature of the community, it’s important to add that 15,070 are migrants holding “unauthorized” or “undocumented” status—81% of whom are Mexican, the majority of the rest coming from El Salvador, China, Guatemala, and Korea.²

I’d prefer not to quantify the population through these very US specific classifications of ethno-racial groups. Nonetheless, the demographics are here to help tell the current story of Boyle Heights’ cultural identity as it relates to geographical heritage—mostly Mexican, but also Central and South American, ancestry. However, an article in *LA Times* recalls the memory of sociologist Bruce Phillips, whose father ran a music shop in Boyle Heights from 1936 to 1986.³ During that time, the area was historically the intersection of Russian, Japanese, Latinx and Jewish Americans. Bruce blamed “redlining”⁴

and the construction of several freeways pushing the Jewish population out. The Boyle Heights Alliance Against Artwashing and Displacement (BHAAAD) navigate the history on their webpage—“The first wave of internal displacements occurred in the 1930s with the Public Works Administration slum tenement clearance in the areas of Pico Gardens, Aliso Village, and Ramona Gardens. This displacement was a precursor of the Chavez Ravine struggle in the 1950s and 60s. The displacement in the 30s was followed by Japanese internment in the 40s, which also pushed hundreds of people from their homes in the neighborhood.”⁵

Seemingly, the population with the least available opportunities for mobility (and the ones not susceptible to internment) were left to inhabit the district further, one that was being increasingly ignored by the Greater Los Angeles county. Buying a home (whether in or outside of Boyle Heights) may not have been an option for most, as racial inequities in lending practices significantly affect this locality. Only 18% own their homes,⁶ while Latinx Americans are 78% more likely to be given a high-cost mortgage, and African Americans are 105% more likely.⁷ Renting in this part of the city was reasonable and still is compared to North and West LA. Under the Rent Stabilization Ordinance (RSO), 88%⁸ of renters—in Boyle Heights—are protected from a rent increase no higher than 3%, but things are starting to change.

Between November 2010 and October 2017, the median rent (non-RSO) in Boyle Heights for all homes—apartments, condos, single-family houses—jumped from \$1,632 to \$2,345, according to statistics from the real estate firm Zillow. That’s a 44% increase in the past seven years, while salaries have stagnated. No one making California’s minimum wage, a paltry 10.50\$ an hour, could afford a market rate apartment alone, and this is considered an inexpensive district. Dispossession is rising in Los Angeles, due to evictions and lack of affordable housing—a study estimates the homeless population at around 60,000,⁹ many of whom live outside and not in shelters.

Numerous organizations have begun documenting the changes taking place in Boyle Heights, as they desperately work to make their efforts against inequity visible. For example, KPCC—a Member-supported radio news station—has been chronicling displacement and tracking how Boyle Heights residents are resisting it. By creating a map, viewers can research struggles such as: the 6th Street Bridge project, the transformation of the Sears Roebuck building, the 24/7 sit-in of community garden Proyecto Jardin, the musician’s struggle at Mariachi Plaza, an activist-interrupted bike tour planned by Adaptive Realty, and the closing of legacy business Carnitas Michoacan.¹⁰ Proponents of housing justice stress that the most serious issue facing Boyle Heights is the city’s gradual dismantling of major public housing entities, while the former industrial area connected to it is rejuvenated and preserved for new galleries. In 1996, Aliso Village and Pico Gardens lost 900 units from the public housing projects (initiating the undoing of the largest concentration of public housing west of the Mississippi). This area is now colloquially known as “the flats” and appropriated by some marketing to avoid the use of “Boyle Heights.” Sixty rent controlled homes were lost In 2005 for the expansion of the Hollenbeck Police Station and there are proposals to demolish 1,175 rent controlled units in Wyvernwood for the construction of 4,150 market rate units.¹¹ These facts come from BHAAAD members, who work diligently to document these statistics.

There is a long legacy of dissent here. The Dolores Mission in Boyle Heights was one of the first churches in the US to declare itself a sanctuary for all immigrants—in 1986 they sheltered refugees escaping the war in El Salvador and poverty in Mexico.¹² In the 1990s, to address the violence of gang and police brutality Mothers United (formerly known as Comite Pro Paz en el Barrio) formed peace barbecues on the streets and intervened taunting gang rivals by forming a human wall.¹³ From the early 20th century, Yiddish-speaking Jewish immigrants with liberal, socialist and communist ideals stamped their identity here. In the 1940s, it was

the campaigning efforts of the Breed Street Shul (the last remaining synagogues of some 30 that once dotted the area), acting as a node for local Jewish and Latinx communities that enabled the election of Edward R. Roybal, the first Latino Councilmember.¹⁴ Organising is standard practice and on the streets it is palpable to this day, celebrated in visual representations of resistance. Murals around Mariachi Plaza are emblazoned with the legacy of the 1960s Chicano civil rights movement—simultaneously, graffiti pronouncing, “hipster go home” and “fuck white art” is seen spray-painted on walls and gallery exteriors.

The Opening of PSSST and its Backlash

It was astonishing when PSSST closed their artist-run space in February 2017, having opened their doors only nine months earlier—evidently due to pressures from gentrification opponents. Disquieted murmurs began to resound through questions of agency and complicity; of activists, artists and the spaces they run. I interviewed Timo Fahler, co-founder of art space BBQLA, who described his frustration regarding dialogue between specific activist groups and galleries. “We’re still working to find a way to have that conversation in the local community because the unfortunate thing is Defend Boyle Heights (DBH) came out of the gates saying, ‘fuck you get out of here’. There was never a ‘let’s have a conversation’ and see how the artists can come together with the community.” He added that when gallerist Eva Chimento, of Chimento Contemporary, got up to speak in a local meeting she was heckled, even threatened by one DBH member saying, “they now know who she is and they will be following her to make sure she leaves the community.” DBH is a member of BHAAAD,¹⁵ (including numerous local organisations) that have targeted the influx of galleries—many located on South Anderson Street, a formerly industrial stretch between the 101 freeway and the

eastern bank of the Los Angeles River. On their website, BHAAAD demands immediate action, in the same uncompromising tone that Fahler refers to because they are often disheartened by the spurious efforts of “dialogue” spurred on mainly by the interests of gallerists. One paragraph detailing demands of the acephalous group states “every day, at least three families are pushed out of Boyle Heights. Art and artists are paving the way for investors to accelerate this process, and as a collective alliance, we see the galleries in Boyle Heights as profiting from that process. For years the people of Boyle Heights have been fighting for their right to stay in their homes and today we ask the galleries to leave our neighborhood immediately.”¹⁶

The protesters have clarified the situation in an unprecedented affecting method, “What I haven’t realized until now is the way I am complicit in gentrification[...]developers see artists as ground troops,” says Fahler. But he doesn’t agree with the accusation that art is preferentially to blame, “I think every person has a role in fighting displacement. I think we’re [protesters/artists] on both sides of the coin. It would be hypocritical to say that ‘no I only fight displacement’ or ‘no I only cause displacement.’ There is an ebb and flow and a balance to what you can do as a human being.” BBQLA has also been attacked by activists in April, who threw laundry detergent at people—“I looked down the street[...]there are like 15 to 20 kids with masks on dressed all in black walking towards our space. They started throwing stink bombs and pouring soap and laundry detergent in the studio. They also pulled up the barbecue stand and poured soap over all our meat.” Fahler describes how shocking it was, even angering, and it made him scared but “it really made me sad more than anything,” he says. It hasn’t gotten to the point where they feel compelled to close their doors, instead Fahler says, “We got one of the best openings we’ve had, which is great.”

For PSSST the closing was heartbreaking. The three founders, Barnett Cohen, Pilar Gallego, and Jules Gimbrone, had secured a

lease from a landlord who agreed not to charge them rent for five years—subsequently extended to 20 years provided they maintain a 501(c)(3) nonprofit status. The motivation to create an inclusive and intersectional space that worked with “underrepresented artists—women, people of color, LGBTQ-identified,” proclaimed in their mission, did little to assuage the fears of activists. Their closing statement reads:

The ongoing controversy surrounding art and gentrification in Boyle Heights caused PSSST to become so contested that we are unable to ethically and financially proceed with our mission. Our young nonprofit struggled to survive through constant attacks. Our staff and artists were routinely trolled online and harassed in-person [sic]. This persistent targeting, which was often highly personal in nature, was made all the more intolerable because the artists we engaged are queer, women, and/or people of color. We could no longer continue to put already vulnerable communities at further risk.”¹⁷

In response, BHAAAD congratulated their efforts saying, “This closure is a victory for BHAAAD and Defend Boyle Heights, and we claim it as such. Civil discourse only functions when it is intersectional: the erasure of a predominantly working class community of color demanding your removal is nowhere near intersectional, therefore void. The coalitions we build can not be distracted by the naive notion that art galleries can be maintained without direct complicity in speculative development.” PSSST countered, thwarting this manner of addressing the needs of vulnerable populations, weather economically or socially, “while our closure might be applauded by some, it is not a victory for civil discourse and coalition building at a time when both are in short supply.” However, BHAAAD answers that “PSSST arrogantly ignores the reality of the people who must build coalitions and local power to survive! As President Trump escalates deportations, as Border Patrol and ICE enforce the executive orders that violate the civil rights of Muslims and immigrants[...]the most marginalized people must build stronger national coalitions in order to resist!”

Furthermore, they asked, “why was there funding for a 501(c)3 to run a gallery to attract new people to Boyle Heights, but not for services for the existing community? Because the forces that backed PSSST never had any interest in Boyle Heights, except as a real estate investment opportunity. This is the tragedy of artwashing: it channels philanthropy into destroying neighborhoods.”¹⁸

On the same site, two public housing exponents, Delmira González and Ana Hernández, who have lived for decades in Pico Aliso now called Pico Gardens, describe their decades-long efforts fighting violence among youth, erasing hostile graffiti and deflecting brutality brought on by police who treated them as enemies. They say that for years they have been asking for improvements demanding better schools, youth programs but now what comes “are not the improvements we asked for. What has come are forced improvements imposed on us by people who do not know us or understand our history. Now that our community has improved, artists arrive with their galleries and their coffee shops, close our businesses, raise our rents, and offer us everything they never gave us when we were alone fighting.” Partly due to such organising efforts, a parallel is evident between the rise of home prices and the escalation of arts and entertainment entities in Los Angeles overall, as seen in Fig. 1. While laterally, there is a hike in rental prices with the decline of gang members, as seen in Fig. 2.

2. Inverse Correlation

Two independent statistics mirrored on half circles:

- rent price index (right)
- number of gang members (left)

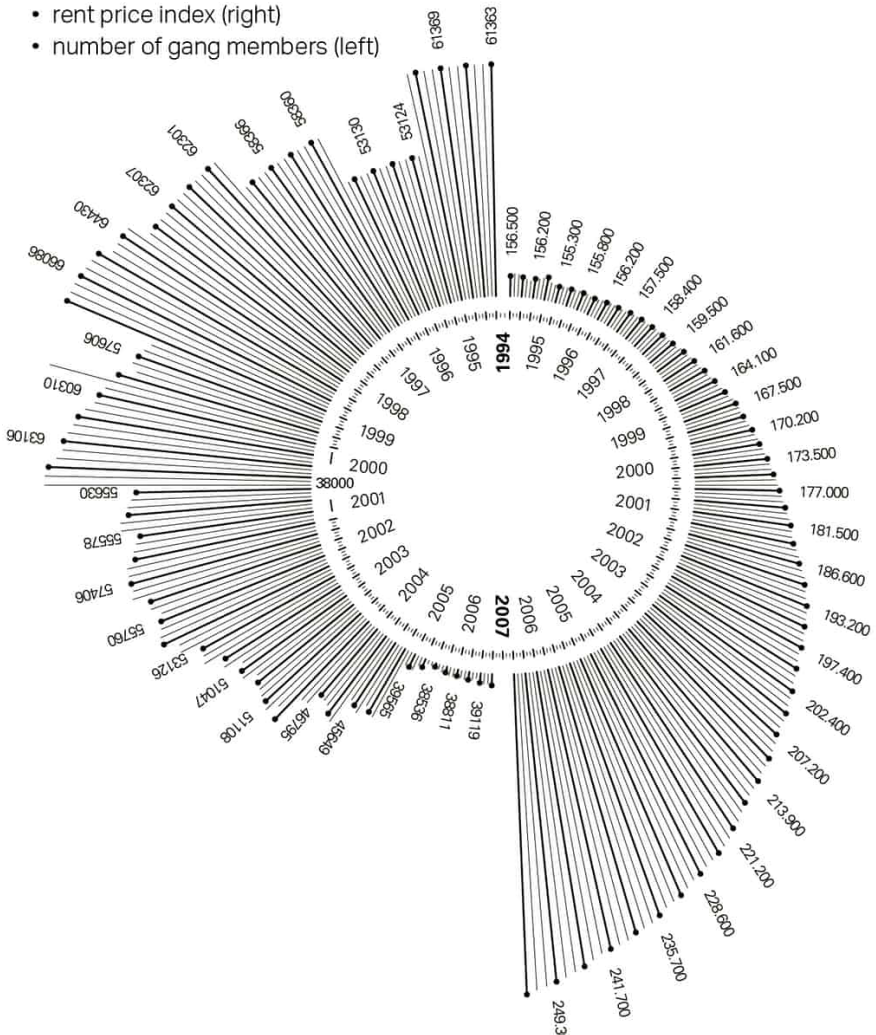


Fig. 2: Herwig Scherabon, *The art of gentrification: city data made beautiful*.²⁰

On November 8, 2017, González and Hernández addressed a letter to Laura Owens, an artist who runs gallery 356 Mission, in Boyle Heights. In 2012, it began as her personal studio space, but one year later she converted it into a public gallery with the help of Wendy Yao, founder of Ooga Booga bookstore, and New York gallerist Gavin Brown.

Our community of Pico Aliso is a couple of blocks from the Laura Owens gallery, 356 Mission. The people who live in that community have been fighting against the [sic] eviction for 20 years. First, they removed more than 900 families from our neighborhood. Later, they wanted to privatize our homes, now they raise the rents to immigrant families. When we spoke with Laura Owens and asked her to close her gallery, she told us that her employees were going to lose their jobs but she did not say anything about the hundreds of families whose housing is in danger. She said she was going to come back to talk to us, but never came back and we're still waiting for her to come talk to us.

Many people tell us that we don't want art in our community, but we tell these people that they don't want us in our neighborhood and that is why they support the galleries. Today we want to tell Laura Owens that her paintings do not help us, that her gallery does not improve our lives and that if she wants to sell her paintings she should move to Beverly Hills.²¹

The activists may appear a familial community, but many of the gallerists also know each other. This comes as no surprise, given that the art world is stereotypically small. It was Owens who first informed gallerist Michele Maccarone of an available building in Boyle Heights. When Maccarone launched her eponymous gallery in 2015, she had this to say about the neighbourhood: "It still has a dangerous quality—I kind of like that[...] I like that we spent a fortune on security."²² Ironically and sadly apposite, Maccarone takes responsibility for the incipient transformation of NYC's Lower East Side. There, she opened her first gallery in 2001—in an area where none had existed before—saying, "I was the first asshole who opened

on the Lower East Side. I take complete responsibility for bouging up that neighborhood.”²³

Further exacerbating Maccarone’s position, Joel Garcia of Self-Help Graphics & Art (SHG) community arts centre says they have “made it clear that they are here specifically because it’s cheap rent, that they have no intention of working with the community. So has Venus Over LA—both of them have been clear saying ‘we do not care what is happening, this is just cheap rent, that is why we are here.’” Remarks like these incite invidiousness—instead of deference to the history, or value, of the communities of which they occupy, there is no recognition at all of the local presence—effectually justifying art colonialism. Garcia is the Director of Programs and Operations at Self Help Graphics, our interview came after his space was conjointly criticised by protesters.

Before Laura Owens neglected to respond to the Pico Aliso letter, her gallery was boycotted by BHAAAD when it held the first meeting of the Artist Political Action Network (APAN) in February, 2017. Around that time PSSST was closing amidst increasing gallery protests and national media attention. Artist Charles Gaines, an attendee, felt that “the effort to organize artists to be effective political activists is being overshadowed by the Boyle Heights anti-gentrification movement.” APAN was forged as a grassroots movement to address the social trauma artists felt after the election of Donald Trump—formulated by well-known artists such as Kathryn Andrews, Andrea Fraser, Liz Glynn, Tala Madani, Monica Majoli, Laura Owens, Kulapat Yantrasast and Gaines himself. Afterwards, he circulated an essay addressing the boycott via APAN’s public network saying, “the confrontation had a benefit; it revealed the hyper simplified politics at the bottom of the movement that has forced a binary where artists, depending on their views are either on the side of the powerful (galleries, museums, real estate investors, neoliberal economics in general) or the powerless (those whose survival are threatened,

neighborhood autonomy and anti capitalist resistance).” Gaines believes this simplification is a lack of understanding of how race and class play into the history of gentrification.

Historically, it was the white gentrifiers with an anti-mainstream attitude who could go without resources (i.e. artists or students)—moving into marginalised communities and relishing in the affordable prices. Meanwhile, it was the poor communities of color fighting for equitable resources and affordable rents. For Gaines, the activists are concerned only with affordable housing, not with larger frameworks of infrastructural improvements. Galleries are analogous to the structures of resources that have been frequently denied impoverished areas. To boycott them is for Gaines a position of white privilege, “galleries have enriched communities that defined themselves as marginal to the mainstream with respect to whites, or segregated from the mainstream with respect to minorities[...]For minorities, the debate over the value of galleries operates historically in a backdrop of cultural segregation whereas, for whites, it operates in a backdrop of an intentional separation from a mainstream establishment where cheap rent plays a pivotal role.” However, activists have advocated for increased services but Gaines portends it’s “a complicated affair because the reality is that the investment must come from private or public sources, minority communities are historically without resources. Hence, it is important to them that a way is found to bring in these resources. Excluding galleries because they are part of the neoliberal takeover preserves a community without resources.”

Gaines’ letter parallels some of the polemics I have read in an anonymous Facebook group called Defend Boyle Heights From Defend Boyle Heights—an Internet-based anti-gentrification aggregate who promulgate that groups like BHAAAD and DBH are being co-opted by white artists who are using the movement to further their artistic careers. Jules Gimbrone of PSSST couldn’t give time for an interview saying, “honestly, the whole last year was extremely traumatizing and I am not sure if I have the distance to talk

about these things in complex ways just yet.” However, he did explain in a later email his opinion that the “non-native BH ‘artists’” have instrumentalized “the real struggles, fear, and angers of the native Boyle Heights community members for symbolic gesture (i.e. their own art practice).” This sentiment is echoed by Joel Garcia—“the struggle of displacement and gentrifications is being co-opted by white privileged artists and some institutions who might feel guilty in their role of it, and this is their way of absolving themselves and deflecting responsibility. Because a lot of these artists are from out of town. They are not native to LA.”

I believe that line of discourse is incredibly paternalistic and rote within white supremacist mentality. Elizabeth Blaney, co-founder of the Union de Vecinos, a supporting member of DBH, has said in a recent *Guardian* article how disrespectful it is to describe the leadership in Boyle Heights as being lead by “white,” “non-native,” “artists.” Moreover, it undermines and dismisses the decades-long history of community-lead resistance to many struggles—“it’s racist to imply that Latino members of the community can’t think for themselves and are brainwashed by a group of white people. It’s ludicrous and insulting to all they’re doing.”²⁴

Where I do agree with Garcia is when he speaks of the disconnect between some of the DBH members who appear estranged from the other needs of the community. He attended a recent panel at the Museum of Contemporary Art, where DBH member and part of Ultra-red artist collective—Walt Senterfitt—said that they “didn’t need youth programs—that they didn’t care about youth programs,” they cared about housing. For Garcia, this is completely out of touch saying, “Boyle Heights was polled[...]youth programs and youth development were the number one priority that folks felt was needed. 50% are under the age of 25, if we’re not building the infrastructure for that youth base, which is half the community, to remain in their homes, what are we actually fighting for?” The dominant narrative

from that panel was affordable rent but “it’s still talking about paying rent to someone else, not talking about building the mechanisms to be owners of the land that they live on[...]it speaks volumes to how disconnected they are from the community that they are proposing they advocate for.”

Whether or not everyone agrees on the closing of PSSST, the arguments made by rooted locals has dragged art spaces out of the sanctum of tacit valorisation. They have exposed art and the cultural spaces of inquiry and participation it fosters, as neither harmless, neutral, nor apolitical. Their existing engenders unseen ripple effects—flows of normalising or disrupting, devaluing or inflating—reverberations of which are not felt sometimes for decades. Perhaps, it is simplistic to clump all galleries together, neglecting to make any distinctions between those who would enrich the community and those who exploit it. Conversely, the activists mentioned seem to declare the impossibility of artists’ ability to take a political stand when the material reality cannot remove itself from institutional entanglements. “Artists cannot organize around politics, make political art, and yet ignore the material impacts and realities of their own presence, which only reinforces the violence of racial and economic privilege,”²⁵ declared BHAAD in reaction to Charles Gaines’ essay and boycott of the APAN in 356 Mission.

Gentrification Seedlings, Part I

I spoke with Cynthia Strathmann who works for Strategic Actions for a Just Economy (SAJE), a non-profit organisation focusing on economic justice by way of tenant rights, healthy housing, and equitable development located in South Los Angeles—an area that is also home to many low-income communities of colour.

The greatest challenge[...]is the horrific history of racial injustice and

segregation that led to systematic divestment and suppression in this community, as well as the incredible concentration of global capital that's happened in recent years. The concentration of wealth means that increasingly the local environment is owned by a few outsiders. For example, owning homes was one of the few ways that working class people could build up wealth. Now homes are out of reach for many, and corporations are buying up single family dwellings and turning them into permanent rentals. Rentals not only do not build wealth, they actively sap the wealth from communities and send it elsewhere. As neighbourhoods change and housing becomes more expensive, new residents may move in who do not value the current social environment.

It is important for me to think about this last part: whose social environment is it, and what values are being recognised? I interviewed Reyna De La Rosa, a proclaimed Angeleno, who moved to Boyle Heights after being unable to afford the rising rents and cost of living in Echo Park and Koreatown, where she grew up. De La Rosa has a working class background, is a 24-year-old artist and recent college graduate working at Salt & Straw, an ice cream franchise in Downtown LA. She was lucky enough to find Paco, a landlord who didn't see her as a gentrifier and who, in solidarity with the working class population, keeps rents low, and "seems more interested in the peace and environment of his home." As De La Rosa continues, "He's just more focused on that than the money. He explained to me how he was fourth-generation here in Boyle Heights." Paco offered De La Rosa an affordable rental price but, as she affirmed, being half-Mexican may have helped—"I never lived in Boyle Heights, it's very different for me. I'm half-Mexican and half-Dominican. Here, the Mexican culture and population are active—I never lived around it. I lived with mostly Central-American and Caribbean people." Certainly, Paco is aware of the growing displacement of vulnerable populations, namely working class people of colour (POC). Other landlords might see a rising personal income, one they welcome and perhaps feel they deserve. De La Rosa remarked that her previous landlord, just a couple of blocks away, was pro-gentrification. She was eager to receive

higher rents due to the neighbourhood's changing reputation saying, "this is an upcoming neighbourhood, things are different now, things are less crazy, it's less dangerous, and people from different places are moving in." An added benefit moving to Boyle Heights for De La Rosa was the fact that her mother had moved there as well. Garcia further explains this migration. He grew up in the Maravilla Housing Community of East LA and for over 20 years has worked as an artist, arts-administrator, and cultural organiser. He explained to me how the Metro Line stimulated much of the first wave of gentrification in this part of the city, and the beginning of community divisions.

A lot of my high school years were spent in Boyle Heights, organizing around youth issues through the punk scene. Back then, we didn't separate East Los Angeles and Boyle heights as two different communities. Though East Los Angeles proper was unincorporated and Boyle Heights was within the official city boundaries—to us it was one big community. There was no separation that these are two separate communities coexisting as one—for me that distinction didn't happen until thoughts around the Gold Line [one of LA's metro lines] started happening. The development primarily reinforced those boundaries of city and county, and that's key to know because now when folks talk about Boyle Heights, they forget that the East had always operated as one unit—now the community is being separated by that characterisation.

This Metro line fortifies the economic interests of developers. It's estimated the construction caused the loss of more than 250 rent-controlled units for families, along with local businesses and a supermarket. An interactive map by UCLA's Luskin School of Public Affairs identifies areas in Los Angeles that have been gentrified from 1990 to the present, with the most significant impacts seen around the Downtown areas. The transit neighbourhoods are linked "with higher increases in whites, college-educated, higher income households and increased cost of rent." This is "conversely associated with greater losses in disadvantaged populations. Including individuals with less than a high school diploma and lower income households."²⁶

Initially, as Garcia explained, the community had been organising around equity in public transportation but ultimately didn't have a voice in the decision-making process. Now, when developers come in, there is a great deal of worry and distrust—"the reaction is that anytime something gets beautified it's like, 'who was that for?' On the flip side, what we [SHG] are trying to do is ensure that these resources that have been organised for and requested as a community ends up in those hands." In 2009, he says, the council commissioned a report from the UCLA planning department of what would be the "best use of Boyle Heights creative aesthetic." It was concluded to establish an arts corridor.

At that time artists were excited about it but those groups were also concerned about the idea of it being coopted. A group called ARTES (artists revitalising the east side) was established, primarily housed here at Self Help Graphics, and we've had meetings probably on a monthly basis up until 2013. We were continually prompted to spearhead that idea and we said we couldn't move forward on any of those proposals without the community of artists and the community itself being the driving force behind it. Some of the things we were given as possible scenarios to build in this "arts corridor" was this idea of art walks and murals. To us this seemed superficial and didn't address financial literacy for artists, nor talked about different types of economic development strategies for legacy businesses. So we pushed back and started convening artists, residents, business owners, community leaders to have these convos around how we could actually push the councilmen to create a process that would be more community driven/informed.

That kind of brought us up to 2013-14 where during the redistricting of the city,²⁷ the councilmen absorbed a lot of the downtown entertainment area which had Disney Hall, Nicol Mere's school, the Museum of Contemporary Art and the Music Centre—a lot of the higher profile art institutions of the city and the county. The boundary before ended in Little Tokyo and from that redistricting it extended to this area. The concern was the reallocation of resources. For example, Broadway Avenue, which has been a historically Latino

business corridor in Downtown LA, became a priority for them to “revitalise.” A lot of resources that could have gone to Boyle heights have gone into that project. The fear became that the prioritisation of different projects would now be Downtown LA, and it has been. Downtown Los Angeles has received major support from the councilmen and the equity has not been reflected. We had been organizing for decades around resources for the community, it felt like Boyle heights was no longer a priority.

I spoke to Quetzal Flores, a musician, activist and the director of Arts and Culture at East LA Community Corporation (ELACC) about the vicissitude of Downtown LA and he had this to say:

What was once a thriving working class arts district is now a hipster, middle class—and above—arts district. You used to have family-owned cafes and business; now you have Cafe Gratitude, now you have this vast complex that is above market, that spreads from 2nd street to the 4th street bridge. Those who occupy those spaces are a bunch of white people that have the means to afford the rents—many of them artists. This is a big point that never gets covered in these reports or articles. Where there is a history of progressively moving stuff this way towards us [Boyle Heights], and many of those things are galleries.

The thing that really changed the face of that area were the galleries. These investments create “green zones” or “safe zones” for people to come back and repopulate the centre of the cities. At the same time you had all these other people living in the centre of the cities, and they are being pushed out into the suburbs, and we are not talking about 1950s suburbs, that had beautiful parks and tree-lined streets—these are like dilapidated, fucked-up, abandoned communities. So this is a part of that process of resegregation—it’s being played out as ‘oh the galleries are being attacked.’ It’s really a larger issue, and maybe these folks cannot articulate it in this way, but these are the stakes. We are experiencing a resegregating of this city, and many people in this neighbourhood will be damned if they are going to be pushed out.

The Downtown Los Angeles arts district is increasingly an area where

galleries are either blue chip or seem more like an amusement park. Such as the Museum of Ice Cream—brainchild of Maryellis Bunn who's pop-up is the envy of the glitterati and anyone who can pay the \$29 ticket, craving shiny selfies packed with bubblegum backdrops. It is easy for me to see the mistrust conflated with disgust of the Arts District as it overflows into Boyle Heights. Institutions of culture, large or small, have been co-opted by consumerism, and its language and titles used symbolically for capitalist gain. Or, am I holding on too dearly to the sanctity of the word "museum"?

Strathmann contends that "museums are grounded in the same elitist conceptions of taste and its value in distinguishing people from each other as art galleries. Museums are also based on the conceit that the elevating properties of art can somehow be more equitably spread throughout society." However, she qualifies with her uncertainty in this claim that museums are "at least *trying*." Divides in taste and value are a splintering force, De La Rosa submits that galleries could be more welcoming and make a more concerted effort to engage in the direct community. Even as a person with an arts education, the atmosphere is excluding saying, "I don't feel all that welcome in these galleries that are popping up around Echo Park and Boyle Heights. So I can only imagine the next person, like my mom or someone else, walking around and not being all that comfortable." Strathmann affirms this notion: "It's little wonder that existing residents often find the presence of art galleries highly provocative," she says. "Owning art and collecting art are hobbies for the rich[...]its sole social function is to distinguish as superior the owner from other people[...]and the purported superiority conveyed by it *vis-à-vis* a display of 'better taste' only props up a system of cultural inequality, that reinforces economic inequality, and allows further exploitation of the poor."

Garcia, meanwhile, illustrates the point that the issues around displacement are layered. For instance, in the Echo Park area where De La Rosa grew up, he accuses the Boutiques; in Highland Park "it was the bars that helped open up the gateways." For Strathmann

“galleries and artist-run spaces fit into this problem by changing the monetary value placed on buildings and land through association with something (art) that has a higher market value than other commodities or services historically sold in the area (basic furniture, inexpensive clothes, haircuts, street food vendors). This is particularly true because art that is for sale, that’s created as a commodity, is different from art that is created for free to be a voice for the community. Fine art, in our society, is really the provenance of the elite.” However, Garcia reasserts that the complexities are beyond a one-dimensional outlook, which pits art against housing, saying, “that’s the concern—when you apply a blanket approach to this, you’re actually redirecting this as one problem when really this issue is so layered.”

Garcia informs me that there are plans for a biotech corridor in Boyle Heights. Since universities, as previously mentioned, play a part in gentrification, it’s worth taking a brief look at the geography of the University of Southern California (USC). The main campus called University Park stretches over 229 acres (almost 93 hectares). The Health and Science campus, adjacent to Boyle Heights just across the freeway, boasts of its 72 acre campus²⁸ and has plans for further development as a Biotech Park—the expansion of which comes at no small cost. The “master plan” includes four major initiatives, which would require “an investment of \$11.0 million in one-time capital funding and \$1.8 - \$3.5 million annually in on-going funding, utilizing existing County land and buildings, and other potential incentives, over a five-year pilot period. In addition to County funding, Battelle (a global research and development organization) estimates that more than \$300 million could be raised from institutional, private, and foundational investors.”²⁹ As for the major reason to accelerate this project? “Officials at USC say the hub could create 3,000 construction and 4,000 permanent jobs that would provide employment opportunities in the largely Latino, low-income neighborhood.”³⁰

In a 2016 article, journalists Steven Cuevas and Kat Snow explain why locals aren't thrilled with the idea. Abel Salas, a local poet employed at a warehouse near the expansion site states "It is going to change the complexion of the neighborhood, literally[...]It doesn't seem realistic to expect people who are among the poorest and least likely to graduate from high school[...]to suddenly be trained or re-trained to have a biotech job, and what's going to happen to them?" From what I have read, it seems these jobs are mostly to incentivise recent graduates of USC to stay in LA. The developers blame a lack of biotech infrastructure causing migration to other biotech cities like San Francisco and San Diego.³¹ Most Boyle Heights youth don't attend USC due to high tuition rates, lack of high school diplomas and the undocumented status of many. The question of who such a development is really for is practically answered but the effects it will have on the adjacent low-income community is glaringly obvious. With all these new jobs people will need somewhere to live, and naturally they will want to live close to their work, particularly in a city famous for its traffic congestion.

The obstacles facing residents, though daunting, are not intractable and Garcia argues that "there is not one singular strategy. We have to talk about it at the policy and community level, to do that you have to build a coalition—that might present different approaches to this but have the same goal. That hasn't happened in Boyle Heights, and this conversation with this narrative around artwashing is not allowing for that to happen either." As Strathmann stresses, "it doesn't matter particularly who is promulgating a system of social differentiation that ultimately disadvantages the poor. It's not simply the artist or the subject matter that make art a force for gentrification, it's the role art plays in reconstituting social inequality through its circulation as social capital in a capitalist economy." Although I can relate to her concerns, I imagine her argument is not accounting for emancipatory practices that, though eventually commodified, push the boundaries

of justice by elucidating subjugated knowledge. Garcia expresses his frustration with the arguments that solely focus on the complicity of art, “if that’s how we look at things,” he says, “when it comes to the wellness of a community, why aren’t they protesting the liquor stores? Why not protest the medical marijuana dispensaries? None of them benefit the community. One of them brings alcohol, the other brings drugs.”

Two Art Spaces

Self Help Graphics

Self Help Graphics & Art is a cultural institution, the history of which dates back to 1970 when it was founded by artist and Franciscan nun, Karen Boccalero. It has been a force in Boyle Heights all these years and even though they had been targeted in the wave of protests against art spaces, the wider community response has been more supportive than that of newer spaces. When DBH protested them—“saying that art belongs in Beverly Hills”—Joel Garcia describes how the community defended them online and on Facebook saying, “you’re crazy, art saved my life. If it weren’t for Self Help Graphics I wouldn’t be here.” He admits the space is still targeted but more indirectly since the backlash, “the community knows very well the work we do here.” Furthermore, it has somewhat bolstered more support. “Workshops are selling out in a manner of days and many are filled to capacity.” The unwanted provocation brought residents inside their doors, “folks who hadn’t been to Self Help in a while came back like ‘i miss this place. I need to be involved,’ it’s reminded people the work that we do.” SHG describe themselves as a community arts center, offering professional printmaking, organising cultural and annual events, including arts engagement and education, as well as coordinating youth and community outreach. Garcia predicates much

of their work by employing the arts “as a strategy of organising” and as the building blocks to stimulate difficult conversations. This comes in many forms, including free or affordable workshops—one of the most attended is their youth summer programme. On average about 30 participants come for five weeks—four days a week, three hours a day. It’s a lot to ask of a student, to forfeit time during their summer holiday, and this year they averaged about 53 people.

SHG use the structure of an art space to cultivate community engagement, as well as financial literacy and professional development opportunities for artists. For example, they consistently hire artists and pay a competitive rate, such as \$50 per hour for a lead artist and \$25 per hour for a trainee. The work they do is centered on social engagement, before the nomenclature was utilised as an artistic practice. A recent project called *JornARTleros*—a play on the word “jornalero,” in Spanish meaning day labourers—was featured in the *LA Times*. They turned themselves into a design house for low wage workers, many street vendors, who have been fighting the city for legitimacy. Designing their logo, SHG provided all the materials and taught them the silk-screening process. “It builds up their esteem,” says Garcia, “their work in many ways is them servicing the community, taking care of the people by providing affordable food. This is our way of taking care of them. When I would imagine an officer seeing this individual with his branded shirt, it’s going to give him pause, it’s also a way of preventing harassment from the police.”

SHG also collaborate with a number of groups like ELACC, where Quetzal Flores works, as well as Mujeres de Maiz Las Fotos Project and other businesses around Mariachi Plaza. Their youth work efforts have helped lead the way to policy change. Two years ago, they composed a letter to LA Metro, outlining what they felt were the gaps in community engagement and bringing forth a list of clear solutions for the company to consider. They asked for a six month minimum, in regards to the “black-out” period when it came to the “Exclusive Negotiating Agreement.” This essentially gave more time for organisers

to respond to development plans. They asked for representation within the Design Review Advisory Committee, and Metro then amended the committee to include youth and artists, who before were absent.

One event that young people working at SHG took part in, was an intervention at a construction site where over 500 ribbons were tied to a fence, spelling out “Save Boyle Heights.” Each one had written requests from a survey the group had conducted, asking people what they wanted to see at the site. This action pushed Metro to create a whole different set of guidelines that required thorough outreach from the developers before the exclusive negotiation agreement period. That means the community had to be informed prior to any city hall meeting asking for concessions or changes. This had a significant impact and became something that now Metro does, county-wide, as standard practice. “That’s been the work that we’ve done around this idea of gentrification and displacement, stuff that’s actually changed policy,” says Garcia, “through the use of mobilizing our youth—or actually them mobilizing us!” In many ways, SHG are a model for the framework of socially-engaged spaces, and a clear example in the ways an art space can build reciprocity in their community. Yet, Garcia has expressed his concern when thinking about gallery solidarity, purpose, and function—“I think with anybody that comes into our neighbourhood, they have to be very aware of the needs of the community, but I don’t know that we should have the same expectations from an art gallery that we do of a community serving organisation. One is a private entity and one is a public entity.”

BBQLA

BBQLA is a private entity and self-identified “artist-run” space. The connotation of such a label fortifies the notion of autonomy

for artistic/curatorial experimentation with a grassroots spirit. But how does it function and what separates their practices from other commercial art spaces? When artists Timo Fahler, Adam Beris and Thomas Linder began BBQLA, it was in a shed behind Beris' and Linder's house—in the Silver Lake neighbourhood, near Echo Park and Koreatown. The trio first met at the Kansas City Art Institute where they began a tradition of regular barbecues. All three migrated to Los Angeles because “one either goes to LA or NY to chase the dream of the ‘art life,’” says Fahler, “or to work for artists that are living that dream, or galleries that are providing that dream” in a city “full of transplants.” BBQLA wanted an experimental exhibition space for colleagues who didn't have an opportunity to show work, and to provide a platform for young emerging artists. “The premise was we're meeting every Sunday for these BBQ's anyway, let's just add art to that and let's try, once a month, to have an opening, like a barbecue, and invite all our friends,” says Fahler. At first the artists funded everything themselves, but “probably the biggest proponent of help at that time was Mary Weatherford, whom I was working for—she agreed to be in one of our shows, and she made sure the work was consigned to us. We earned about twenty percent of any sale—no matter when it sold—even five years from now, we would get that.” Linder and Fahler both worked for Weatherford, while Beris worked at David Kordansky Gallery.

Their connections in the art world were growing, as well as their friendships and community. After three shows in the shed, BBQLA needed a bigger space and moved to their current location in Boyle Heights. As an artist-run space, Fahler says they are not too concerned with money, only looking to sustain itself and not to make a profit. Sixty-five percent of a sale goes to the exhibiting artist and any income BBQLA receives goes directly into funding the space, Fahler emphasises that no one member makes any profit from the gallery. They also offer free youth programming via MEATGRINDER, which has grown and takes up more time than Fahler's other duties. “It's gotten to the point where I had to step away from my role at BBQLA

to be more heavily involved with the kids,” he says, continuing that he feels that effort is more rewarding, which his partners support and encourage.

“Before I started BBQLA, I volunteered at a space called *YouthBuild*—in Boyle Heights actually,” says Fahler, about his interest in education, “They didn’t have art classes, and it was kids that got kicked out of their high schools or had gone to jail or were pregnant and wanted to get their GED. I volunteered every Friday and would do a two-hour class and just talk about art with these kids. We would go to galleries and museums—it was the most amazing and rewarding thing I have ever done.” Fahler has expressed his efforts as a service to somebody outside of himself. “This is a way for us to provide a service to a community of migrating artists, or youth in LA, that wouldn’t have an opportunity to visit a studio from an artist that they think is cool or whose work they like.” It has the spirit of generosity and I am in favor of what they are doing, but within myself a certain agitation begins when I wonder, “who is considered an artist and how are they being reached? How has self-criticality entered the discourse, if at all?”

ELACC

As a musical artist, Quetzal Flores informs me how he approaches the process of being “present” in a community and what it means for him to have an emancipatory artistic practice. He describes how social consciousness and organising culture were highly important as he started to formulate the idea of what he was going to do. In turning away from the ambitions of the music business, Flores instead focused on “music as a social technology that provides insight into the idea of ‘process’ itself, humanity, and human interaction.” One of the exercises his band initiated was “collective songwriting”—taking a community through a process of composing together. Flores explains,

“within that project we started to see a huge difference between the business of music and the community-practice of music.” He believes the collective-songwriting activity enacted at a local prison in Los Angeles truly supported “new ways of inmate interaction.” Additionally, “they come back and tell you, ‘hey we wrote this song together and it was beautiful, we did this, we talked about that.’ It’s really healing, but it was challenging at the same time.” In Flores’ opinion, the songwriting is not the important part, the process is. By concentrating on that, he says, “you are already subverting capitalism because capitalism is so focused on profit and product.” Flores’ enthusiasm revolves around community involvement, asking, “how does community engage in music beyond the act of purchasing, downloading, dancing, and going to concerts?” He wanted to know: “How deeply can you participate in this? How vulnerable can you become in this space? What does your lived experience look like and how can that contribute to this conversation?”

Designing projects to be “horizontal at their core,” Flores views participation “not only as a right but as a responsibility.” Other examples he describes include a “gentrification lab” that encompassed different activities—earlier they commissioned a dancer who developed ‘dancing circles’ with locals. As people swung and swayed, she took notes of their movements and styles, then fed these moves back, synthesizing the motion and steps. As the dancer learned her participants’ style, others began to join. “In the end, everyone is doing each other’s dances and they are renaming them such as the *Five-Hour Workday-Step*,” says Flores, “those steps become the vocabulary. You bring in the musicians and the people who are dancing and then it becomes this space where anybody can call out anyone’s step. Once they call out a step, everything shifts.”

Flores’ job is to “provoke imagination[...]and create movement internally—to challenge the current DNA of the organisation and to transform itself by continuing to interrogate itself.” ELACC uniquely has a community organising office. Under Flores’ management, they

are now working on a mural project with artist Omar G. Ramirez. Trained in restorative justice the artist brings what Flores calls those principals and the practices of circle-building into our space. In the end, it's not some artist's "ultimate vision' being put onto this mural[...]we are going through a whole process of researching, designing, and fabricating a mural as an organisation."

Another ELACC project will be the opening of a "food and vegetable co-op with street vendors, having also championed the legalize street-vending effort in LA—the only major city in the US where it's illegal. On top of that, ELACC plans to form a growers co-op. They'll use some of the land that they own to build a raised bed garden, conflating all these efforts towards a prepared food co-op "that will then resource the growers co-op and resource the actual store (the food and vegetable co-op)." They are attempting to create an entire "permaculture economy."

When I offer the concept of hybrid gallery spaces, which maintain a commercial side, ensuring that artists are paid for their work while sustaining a community-oriented ethos that is inclusive and supportive of local artists—like BBQLA—Flores adamantly disagrees. "I would say that's not enough. I would say you're just perpetuating the same system. It's capitalism. The only way I feel would be a comfortable compromise might be 'OK we are *only* going to work with artists in *this* community.' At the core, the purpose of this is to make sure that artists in this community have a way to make a living and on top of that, they are going to reinforce community-process."

In an impassioned discussion, Flores tells me he felt he made a choice, one that came with a sacrifice. "I mean, I'm an artist, part of my living is made performing on a stage. This is my conflict and contradiction. I do this, and so I have had to figure out a way to adjust. At one point we were just touring and performing and we had a record company and management—all that bullshit, right? We had to make decisions that affected our bottom line and ability to make money.

Those decisions were made and they really forced to me to rethink all this stuff—to change my whole trajectory of what this was. I would have been out there still recording, promoting and touring an album. Instead, I’m doing something else and I’m pulling other artists into this work. Pooling resources to make sure that they are supported as well.”

Imagining Solidarity

When Quetzal Flores says, “they can’t just be stand alone artists—purported individual geniuses that have no connection to community” who are “wildly successful but don’t really know how to be in-community,” I wonder what community he is speaking of. Naturally, the owners of BBQLA, SHG and others spread over Boyle Heights have a community. They each have their own separate sub-communities, which might or might not include populations within Boyle Heights. Flores states “they haven’t been held accountable, they haven’t been challenged. You can’t exist in a vacuum, your little safe space, you have to be able to participate and engender participation. And in that case, yes, everyone should be a community artist. Everyone should have a way to engage community and way to talk about your art that brings people into this idea of how you’re thinking. This is the function of art.” He calls unhealthy community practice “extractive” and instead notes the Obon celebrations in Japan or the Senegalese Griots, who traveled between villages collecting and telling stories, and the nourishment these activities brought to people.

Cynthia Strathmann and Flores share many of the same standpoints that art needs to be driven by community and not enshrined by its individualism. “Artists do have a role in social justice work, says Strathmann, “For example, local folks and SAJE organizers constructed a ‘South LA loteria’ game with images they created

themselves. SAJE is decorated with political art that was created to move people to action and to articulate their feelings. One of the things that makes this art a force for justice is that the art is not created for a profit or associated strongly with one individual. It's a form of expression, not a commodity, and is considered a creation of the community. Artists who participate in coalition with local residents, and not in separate, profit-making enterprises can be a huge boon to the social justice movement."

For Strathmann, "Art can be educational and uplifting and challenging and visionary, but if part of the life history of an art piece is to take on a role in the re-instantiation of systemic inequality by propping up cultural hierarchies, that in turn support economic hierarchies, it will almost always, by definition, be a gentrifying force." When I ask her what businesses serve the needs of long-term residents she maintains, "If you think about a business and can imagine a working class person needing it on a regular basis, it is community serving—such as a grocery store, barber shop, auto shop, post office, family restaurants, etc. If no one in the community would need it, it probably isn't—vintage clothing, high-end furniture, art galleries, expensive specialty food, etc."

I understand these as primary concerns, however, I think it's a mistake to reduce the complexity in a manner that eliminates the more experimental spaces who address perhaps less elemental needs. This demand for both foundational necessities and access to art and culture rings behind the sentiments of the *Bread and Roses* textile strike in Lawrence, Massachusetts, of 1912—inspired by James Oppenheim's poem of the same name. Immigrant communities under the leadership of the Industrial Workers of the World—led to a great extent by women—fought for both respect and economic justice. They raised their concerns, demanding both fair wages and dignified working conditions and later became an anthem for the nationwide labour rights activism of the 1920s and 1930s. It was a spirit declaring "we want a *livable* life!"

In an exhibition titled *Bread and Roses. Artists and the Class Divide* at the Museum of Modern Art, Warsaw, another approach was taken to the sentiments of Oppenheim's work—"The status of contemporary artistic practice can be ironically summarized with the same slogan: Artists do sometimes fight for bread for the poor, but their work at least as often consists in delivering roses to the representatives of the social elites. However, the goal is not to affirm the former or to negate the latter." I suggest we take a cue from socialist feminist discourses, who developed a framework of social reproduction, and enabled a thinking to democratise the definition of the artist too. If the practices of the community are seen as artistic, then there is a possibility for the spaces to become more decentralised and de-mythologised.

Paradoxically, artists are seen both as an institutional and an existential archetype. Strathmann and Flores seem to demonstrate this figure only within its institutional and economic entanglements, creating a binary of either/or socioeconomic divisions. I maintain the opinion that it is not only the work of the artist to "decorate" surfaces to motivate people to act. One can do that, but it is also the autonomy of being an artist that is at risk, the fight of which has aligned itself against precarity, women's rights, and the fight for equality of LGBTQ people and communities of color. I agree that to be politically active in one's community is increasingly important, especially with the dawn of the Trump administration and a growing fascist sentiment worldwide. However, participatory practice is not the only measurement towards validating an artistic endeavor, in fact, it can be co-opted by the same forces that enable gentrification.

Where do we Stand?

It is going to take a concerted effort. When gallerists and artists promote the idea of enacting change via political engagement

with politicians and through voting, I think perhaps that is not enough. Joel Garcia has a point when he says “why do we have these expectations for these businesses [Galleries and shops] that should be put on our public officials? I’m not expecting a coffee shop or gallery to address homelessness or address housing issues. That’s not their role. I’m going to put that burden back on our councilmen and our Mayor.” On the other hand, if a gallery can afford to go into an area without disrupting its vulnerable populations, do they have such an obligation?

As the turn from “participatory-practices” to “socially-engaged” engenders new commodities within the art world, I wonder if the gallery itself—whether artist-run, commercial or nonprofit—will find new ways of operating. Would galleries then become more social or communal if this, in turn, will not also be rendered a commodity in the service of intractable development. When Garcia says we need to hold politicians and policy makers accountable over businesses, I wonder if there is a possible future for the idea that individuals can make change alongside political movements? Historical movements that have generated reform, and equity and justice have been mobilised, aligned and benefited by the solidarity between activists, artists and small businesses or individuals with more social capital. As an example, in the US, musicians (such as Ray Charles and The Beatles) refused to play in segregated venues in the 1960s. Today radical cafes, like MoKaBe’s in St. Louis, have long served as a gathering spot for activists from the Black Lives Matter, Occupy, and queer rights movements.

It’s possible for galleries to take a social justice stand and claim that they are not on the side of displacement that will eventually lead to their removal as well. They could contribute by sticking around through the difficult times alongside protesters, demanding the right to stay with the vulnerable populations they neighbor. BBQLA, for example, had a meeting with some other galleries and artists, discussing possible financial contributions they could make

to the community. “An artist named Molly Larkey had some ideas about getting the galleries to join together and provide some sort of percentage—basically each business in the district takes 3% of their yearly income and deposits that into a bank account, which then would subsidize the rising rents in the area.” Fahler says that perhaps this could be the measure “to give back and help these people stay in a place that they love and maybe that they’ve grown up in and don’t want to leave.”

Newer artists moving into Boyle Heights, like De La Rosa, don’t directly work with anti-gentrification protesters but find their own ways of becoming involved with local and socially-significant issues. Homelessness, and protection and equity for women is a concern for De La Rosa, who says, “I’m not an activist but I think everyone has a calling. And my calling is sexual exploitation. I personally work with my godmother and her nonprofit Women of Substance & Men of Honor (WOSMOH), and I help foster youth—many of whom are at risk of homelessness or who have been sexually exploited. I also collaborate with the Dream Center that helps the skid row population. I was really affected by that whole ordeal of skid row and the lack of housing—income inequality getting higher and people becoming homeless—that’s my focus.”

I looked up WOSMOH on Facebook, finding photos of youth groups and organisers smiling during a Thanksgiving event or after receiving their driver’s license. There’s an image of a mantra pinned to an office wall that reads, “I’d rather be completely exhausted from the hard times which breeds success... than well rested from achieving nothing.”—it’s now pinned to my own wall. De La Rosa suggests going door-to-door as a means of engagement, which includes, “Networking, going to the person next door or doing the whole block, really. Finding out who are the business owners and who lives there; what’s going on. Even going to one of their Sunday kind of things, like the farmers markets and just different types of events. There’s a lot going on and I would definitely make sure I’m a part of it. I would

probably go and check it out and make sure I knew the people that are next door to me, and stuff like that—get to know the people in general of that community.”

I ask myself who are the vulnerable people here? In my interview with Fahler, he said he could just leave if things stopped working out saying, “I was born and raised in Tulsa, Oklahoma. My parents were hard-working people that gave me a decent life and whenever I moved away on my own everything that I did, aside from the help that my mother could give me now and then, I did on my own. This is an important thing for me to say as far as my core beliefs about what it is I can do in a space. When it comes to getting a job and paying rent for my location and getting displaced and moving on because my rent has become too expensive, my experience in life is that I’ve moved on.” I asked him if he expected this mindset from other people as well—“What I’m saying is that I’ve made the money that I needed to make in order to stay where I wanted to stay until I had to move on. My answer is, what can I do? I can do BBQLA, I can do MEATGRINDER and then I can have my job and work as hard as I can in order to pay for the space that I have both as an artist—who needs a space to work in—and as a person that helps run an art space that needs to have it’s rent paid[...]When Adam, Tom and I had our first show we said, ‘let’s do this, once we stop having fun let’s stop.’”

Here is exactly the point of many radicals, mobility is a privilege. When you hear “families are pushed out everyday,” what you don’t connect is that many are becoming homeless. In order to not be complicit, artists need to start seeing their role more clearly in relation to incentivising areas for developers, and to possibly make some sacrifices. In light of this attitude, one might ask themselves, “what could that look like?” Responding to my idea of running a hybrid space, like an artist-run laundromat, for example, Fahler was enthusiastic, “I thought, ‘wow that’s rad the idea’[...]this place where people have to go to wash the clothes. They’re going to be there for a while and they can spend some time interacting with art.” There

is no panacea for the problem of gentrification, but if we care about vulnerable populations and benefit from the low cost of living where these people also live, then why not start stretching the idea and composition of art spaces; why not address the concerns of aesthetics, practices, and uses that are being exposed?

Where are we now?

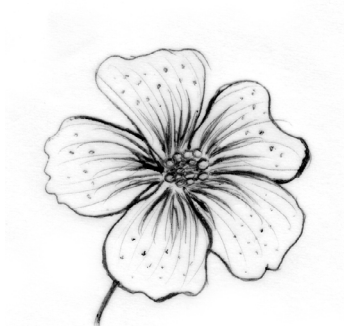
Since art is not exclusively to blame for displacement, how can artists/galleries act in solidarity, instead of catering to the prospect of inevitable destabilization? I am speaking to self-declared non profit spaces typified by a “social-practice” of education, inclusion, generosity and experimentation. How can arts practitioners, in the various fields of production, realign themselves within the legacy of avant-garde traditions which critiqued the aesthetics and assumptions of the commercial art world. The impetus—framed usually through a Marxist or anti-capitalist standpoint—paved the way for such movements as Dadaism, COBRA, De Stijl, the Situationists, Fluxus, Art Workers Coalition through to performance art, happenings, and institutional critique—upending the convention of art object as commodity.³²

Flores and Strathmann assert that social practice focuses less on individualism and more on “process.” To Flores in particular, it is “a vehicle or pathway towards a different kind of world being enacted. They are exercises in building systems of self-governance.” Individualism, he says, is a complete distortion—“It’s the idea that somehow this one person emerged as some individual ‘genius’ who without any other ties to anything else can suddenly express themselves. Even within communities of practice there is individual expression, but they are always tied; they can reference a lineage and a lived history in connection with other people.”

To quote a response of Fahler's when I suggested these methods of artistic practice, he said, "the community can't come in and tell me what I'm supposed to be doing. I'm saying I have a community that it's not about one location, it's about everyone that comes into LA. People that are visiting from New York, Oklahoma, or friends of ours that have moved to Los Angeles that don't know anyone. This is a community of *human beings*. I'm there to provide a space for people to come together and break bread, communicate, talk about ideas and hopefully collaborate and come up with a new idea for a space of their own or some sort of artwork. I'm a human being, you're a human being and if we can't find a way to work together, then this place is kind of fucked." However, his rooting seems much more tenuous, he understands the space is somewhat temporary saying, "I think that things change, BBQLA won't be there forever. Once our program dies off, something else will come in and I'm excited for that. You can call that progress, you can call that gentrification, I have no idea. All I know is that the beneficial long-term scenario is that we find a way to work together to make this good for everyone, or at least good for as many people as we can, in whatever way."

I am still at a loss for any answers. I don't think we should tell an artist or a gallery what to show or what kind of work to do, but I also think there is a level of sacrifice, an elephant in the room that no one wants to address. Financial support for the community is a great idea, but so is the idea of policy change, so that the future of vulnerable populations aren't at the whim of market fluctuations. That's all fine for a business, they have bureaucratic loopholes, access to structures that will cushion the blow. This is not the case for economically depressed populations. This is the land where corporations are legally people, and they unapologetically have more rights than actual people! Ultimately, whether via a community practice or not, people with access can help those without. That's if they see themselves within the framework of equality and freedom, otherwise they are reproducing and reinforcing the structures of domination and oppression.

Conversation Partners



Reyna De La Cruz is an artist who grew up in Los Angeles and lives in Boyle Heights. She received her MFA in 2017 and continues to collaborate with local artists. De La Cruz works with her godmother in the nonprofit organisation Women of Substance & Men of Honor (WOSMOH), who help foster youth

and women who are at risk of homelessness or who have been sexually exploited. She also regularly collaborates with the Dream Center who provide support for the homeless population of Skid Row.



Timo Fahler is an artist, curator, and co-founder of the art space BBQLA. He was born in Tulsa, Oklahoma and lives and works in Los Angeles. The son of a Mexican mother and a German-American father, Fahler's heritage is of profound significance to his practice, informing the consistent material (and immaterial) investigation within his

work. Additionally, Fahler co-organises MEATGRINDER, a youth-oriented resource group and social communion that builds contextual conversations and community around art.



Quetzal Flores grew up in the Chicano movement. As the son of labour union organisers, Flores inherited undying accountability to community struggles. From immigration reform, to supermarket workers union strikes to the indigenous Zapatista struggle. He is the director of Arts and Culture at East Los Angeles Community Corporation and a

Grammy award-winning musician. He is the musical director for the East Los Angeles based rock group Quetzal that he founded in 1993, with his wife Martha Gonzalez joining the group two years later.



Joel Garcia is an artist and cultural organiser, as well as the Director of Programs & Operations at Self Help Graphics & Art since 2010. Garcia works transnationally with both local and Latin American based artists and regularly collaborates with various community organisations such as the UFW United Farm Workers, Save

Ethnics Studies Campaign in Arizona, Alto Arizona Campaign against SB1070, National Day Laborer Organizing Network, and the Cucapa Campaign for Ancestral Fishing Rights.



Cynthia Strathmann is the Executive Director of Strategic Actions for a Just Economy (SAJE)—a Los Angeles based nonprofit that focuses on tenant rights, healthy housing, and equitable development. Strathmann holds a PhD in Anthropology from the University of California, Los Angeles (UCLA), and completed her postdoctoral work at UCLA's David Geffen School of Medicine. Strathmann's academic research has focused on the co-construction of systemic social inequality through economic and cultural activities.

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Kassel: A Shifting Terrain of Agency

Introduction

When I decided to explore gentrification in Kassel, Germany, I had to study not a specific conflict (as I had with the confrontation in LA's Boyle Heights) but in the relationships, mechanisms, and asymmetries of power that exist there. I have frequently been assured, "Kassel is not Berlin," during many discussions with people from the German city, residents for over 20 years, and who profess to having witnessed little change. If gentrification was not an issue, the way it was for other cities, what was going on? I decided to pivot my attention to Nord Holland, an area in the northern part of the town in a nascent stage of regeneration. I wondered what was being developed and whether vulnerable populations were being affected, as well as who was speaking of these struggles and who was listening. What role does the production of culture play in a city home to over 18 museums; and has hosting documenta—one of the most influential art exhibitions in the world—constituted development in this area? My circumstance of not speaking German and only spending four months in Kassel—learning from my colleagues and generous interviewees—is the material I've gathered, aiding me in finding many dynamic and disparate voices.

Drawing as Knowledge Production

For the artist drawing is discovery. And that is not just a slick phrase, it is quite literally true. It is the actual act of drawing that forces the artist to look at the object in front of him, to dissect it in his mind's eye and put it together again.

-John Berger, *Drawing is Discovery*, 1953

My approach to examining Nord Holland was by foot and by bicycle, one that differs from my research on LA, which was done remotely. I was interested in how this distinction would shape my practice as a researcher. Spending weeks looking and taking pictures, I set about sketching from them, drawing as a way to look closer and refer back—contrary to my usual taking of photographs, capturing moments for a speculative glance in the future, never to think of them a second time. Quoting anthropologist Michael Taussig, when I draw, “it’s like a three way conversation is going on between the drawer, the thing drawn, and the hypothetical viewers.”¹ What could drawing teach me about the community and about myself? Would it expand the discourse I was having with Nord Holland? I, admittedly, thought it would from the very beginning, since my work as an illustrator and draftsman for many years has taught me so much about the connection between learning and drawing. “Common language use would describe the photo as a taking, the drawing as a making, and there is wisdom in that.”² This is a wisdom I have relearned over again, each time I sit down in front of a blank page.

Kassel: An Incomplete History

The beginning is always contaminated.
 -Isabell Lorey, *The documenta 14 Reader*, 2017

Kassel is principally known for the documenta exposition and Bergpark Wilhelmshöhe. The park, a UNESCO World Heritage Site since 2013, was built around 1696 around the same time the city became a refuge for French Huguenots fleeing persecution. In the late 18th century the town opened Germany's first building with a theatre, today's Natural History Museum, and mainland Europe's first dedicated museum, Kunsthalle Fridericianum. Prominent residents, Jacob and Wilhelm Grimm, famously collected and wrote their *Kinder-und Hausmärchen* (Children's and Household Tales). Both worked as librarians for the city, and their brother, Ludwig Emil Grimm, worked at the art academy, today's Kunsthochschule (of the University of Kassel), in the early 1830s.³ Napoleon annexed Kassel in 1807 and converted it into the Kingdom of Westphalia, and in 1866 it was again annexed by Prussia.

Around the same time burgeoning industrialisation allowed companies like Henschel & Son, Based in Nord Holland, to prosper. Founded in 1810, the company's sizeable industrial hall was once an essential site of production for locomotives, aeroplanes, tanks and bombs. Today, the corporation is merged with Aerospace, Defense and Railways industry, Bombardier, and remains one of the most powerful arms dealers and manufacturers in Europe, exporting to countries worldwide. Its facilities during the Second World War were furthermore sites of forced labour, provided by a subdivision of Dachau concentration camp.⁴ Consequently, Kassel was targeted by strategic Allied bombing attacks due to its locations of military production—from 1942 to 1945—which all but completely

eradicated the city's population. The city was demolished—practically everything that stands there now was rebuilt, with some institutions reconstructed to their former classical styles.⁵

Nord Holland

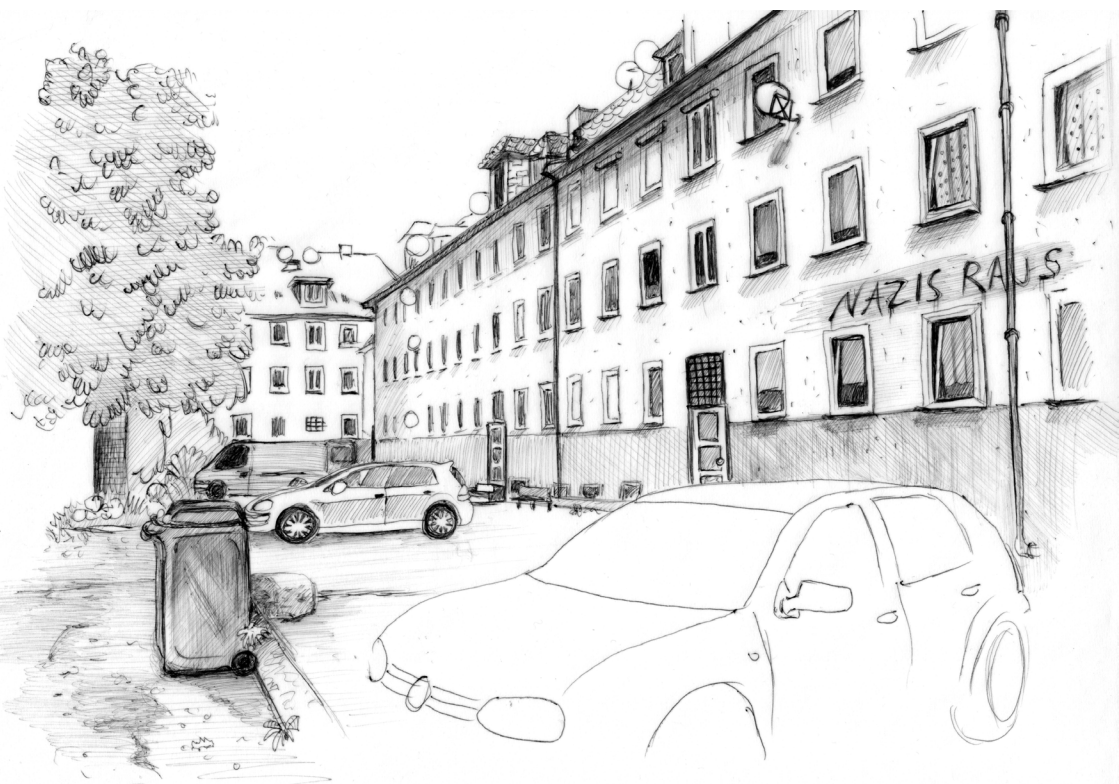
Kassel is diverse and Nord Holland, colloquially known as Nordstadt (North City), is the epitome of the cities' multiculturalism. Citizens and residents comprise mostly Turkish, but also Bulgarian, Syrian, Somalian, and Romanian backgrounds—to name only the biggest immigrant populations—including many of unknown or unspecified origins. Between 1945 and 1946, tens of thousands of *Heimatvertriebene* (expellees) and refugees, of ethnic German descent from the Soviet controlled eastern territories of the former German Reich, found new homes in rural areas around Kassel and in its northern district. The industrial facilities interspersed in Nordstadt—big companies like Henschel & Son and textile manufacturers Gottschalk & Co—were often flanked with workers' neighbourhoods housing *Gastarbeiter* (guest workers) and others. Beginning in the 1950s through to the 1970s, these Mediterranean and North African recruits helped fuel the country's *Wirtschaftswunder* (economic miracle).⁶ Currently, Nordstadt's local refugee centre houses migrants from all over the world, including those escaping violence in Iraq, Afghanistan and sub-Saharan Africa, as well as Syrians fleeing civil war.

In the 1970s, with the post-Fordist decline of industry, and the consolidation of several schools to form the University of Kassel (its new campus focalised in Nordstadt), a previously working-class population of *Gastarbeiter* and German nationals slowly became a population with more migrants, refugees and students. One of the few manufacturing plants still in operation when the Mayor of Nordstadt's

Ortsbeirat (local council) Hannes Volz, arrived to Kassel as a student in the 90s, was the Gottschalk factory. “Regularly it smelled awful,” he remembers, “it permeated the whole area.” Called Gottschalk Hall, the original building, now owned by the university, became a venue for documenta 14.

According to data from the municipality’s website, Nordstadt holds the largest number of inhabitants, with 43.6% classified as “nicht Deutsch” (not German citizens), roughly 20% of the entire non-German population of Kassel.⁷ Today, the area is characterised by international shops, bars, and cultural venues, while the city’s biggest cemetery, several community gardens and the university occupy major sections. As a consequence, living space is densely clustered east of Holländische Straße, a six-lane motorway (including a two-way tramline) which bisects the length of the district. Many people are unemployed, about 10%⁸—double the average of the whole city, and only 4.2% live in a home they own, making most of the population vulnerable to market speculation.⁹ Stagnation continues in Nordstadt, as the long-term unemployment rate has not changed in over 10 years (16.8% as of 2017, the second highest in the city).¹⁰ This might also be a result of racial and social discrimination cast on the area, as Mutter bar co-owner Till Timm says “of course it’s harder to get a job if you’re a migrant, and if you’re a migrant coming from Nordstadt, it’s even harder, I guess.”

These prejudicial assumptions, that Timm observes, are also reflected in how some people I interviewed evaluate the public schools of Nord Holland. Both Timm and Volz chose not to educate their children here, the latter placing his daughter in a private school, and the former moving to the Süd (the southern part of Kassel close to the center) from Nordstadt when his children were of age. “The public schools are better if you live in the west, or the south” says Timm, “fewer problems, richer parents.” Organiser, activist and educator, Ayşe Güleç, who has lived in Kassel for over 30 years, informs me



Inner courtyard of an apartment building—graffiti declares, “Nazi Out,” Nordstadt.

that the schools in Nordstadt are good, with excellent teachers, some she knows personally. “The problem is overcrowding,” she explains, referring to such schools as the Carl-Anton-Henschel-Schule on the Holländische Straße, which has approximately 400 to 600 pupils. (Freie Schule, where Volz’s daughter attends, has only 60). This surely is not the fault of the school but the city, where a population of 16,448 have only one primary school catering to the whole area. Furthermore at the primary level, residents must choose their zoned

school or alternatively pay for a private institution, which markedly influences a student's educational future.

Güleç says that when the first generation of migrants in the 1950s began living in Nordstadt, they worked for big companies like Henschel & Son and Gottschalk & Co. By the 1980s, they had severely downsized and began to close their doors entirely. "These people were the first ones to lose their jobs after working 20 years for those companies." This led many "first generation" migrants to open small businesses "like supermarkets, bakeries, restaurants or tailor shops—and their children would often work there, as well." Of course, Güleç says, these shops are not only from these first generation immigrants of 40 years ago, "Bulgarian people, for example, came five years ago and you can say this is the first generation." As she explains, Nordstadt is unique from other immigrant-identified populations because these shops and people who live there strongly identify with Nord Holland, and not necessarily Kassel: "The people feel like *we are Nordstadter*." Güleç continues, "that's what makes this area special is how much people take care for the needs of the people who are living there. That is the reason you are finding so many speciality shops and activities in this neighbourhood." The people here need bakeries and supermarkets to suit their special needs; foods and products from their home countries, or places outside a typically German context. "You'll find a Russian supermarket," Güleç says, "it means immigrants have autonomy in this neighbourhood." Unlike other low-income communities such as the bordering district of Wesertor, where people live perhaps four or five years, Güleç affirms, "Nordstadters don't leave, and they don't want to leave."

Shop owner of cafe Bei Ali, and Nordstadt Ortsbeirat Deputy Mayor, Ali Timtik has a more pessimistic view: "There had been so many more proper bakeries and butchers in the Northern city," he says¹¹ about the businesses along the Holländische Straße, "but, more and more, you see these spaces are abandoned." According to Timtik, local

residents can not afford to rent these places and when something new does open, it's usually too expensive for many residents to patronise. Certainly, more shops would mean more work, but Timtik laconically states that what is needed are undocumented jobs, "work that's under the table, or off the books; where one is paid in cash, because many unemployed people don't have access to the banking system." Timtik's shop has become iconic, primarily because of his devotion to the neighbourhood, resolve in activating difficult conversations, and political activism. There is a sign on the door of his cafe that reads, *'If you are a racist, sexist, homophobic, or an asshole, do not come in!'* He explained that people who frequent the shop know what lines not to cross, "fascists, or people who are racist and discriminate, or people who are religious, they do come in, but they will respect everyone here," he tells me. "They have the right to express their minds and opinions freely but without an atmosphere of racism." If they "bring this racism" he will kick them out. Timtik moved to Kassel in 1986 at 19 years old, after fleeing oppression in western Armenia on the border of Turkey. Thirteen years ago, his business idea was met with the acceptance and help of the local economy and community of Nordstadt. He was involved in activism before he opened his shop and, for Timtik, being so politically motivated is personal. He has no interest in persuading anyone else to do the same, telling me he tries to live by example, because if people see what he is doing maybe they will try to do the same. The prices at Bei Ali are still affordable, with special deals for locals, like the pupils of Elisabeth-Knipping-Schule, a vocational school for women nearby.

Conflicts and Divisions:

Hannes Volz claims that people are not very political in Nord Holland and that they primarily don't organise themselves concerning problems of gentrification. "They do have associations where they

meet each other,” he says, but as far as he knows, “most people do not mobilise around much political activity.” Volz works with Timtik in the Ortsbeirat, the local council, which represents the interests of the citizens and residents of each district in Kassel— they are re-elected every five years. Additionally, they promote relationships with the city council and the magistrate, as well as maintain contacts with local, district-based organisations. The majority of the current 13 members that represent Nord Holland, are politically left and green. Their monthly meetings are open to the public, many of which take place in Timtik’s cafe.

Volz has been a member of the local council for 10 years, confessing that there exists an enduring disconnect between the Ortsbeirat and the majority of the population. “Most of the people who live here probably don’t know what issues we discuss,” he says, “but I have no idea how to get this into the public.” Volz understands that because the community is not more involved with the council, many of the issues under consideration may not be in the best interests of the people who need representation most. “For instance, there was a political discussion about rent limitations but we failed because we couldn’t get a majority vote,” he says, continuing that he is unsure of any useful strategies for getting more locals involved. “I still wonder why people don’t come up and make more political pressure, but on the other hand, I have to accept this.” Volz is very concerned about the quality of existing housing, and with building and maintaining green spaces. When he started in office, he had tried to convince the city council to plant more trees in the area. Additionally it’s vital, he tells me, to preserve the existing trees around Nordstadt which are part of Joseph Beuys’ work, *7,000 Eichen* (*7,000 Oaks*).

Timtik’s objectives are different. While he professes to having difficulty gathering Bulgarian and Romanian community members to come to meetings, he has had a lot of success organising discussions between the Kurdish and Turkish population of Nordstadt, explicitly pulling people together who are against Turkish President and

Islamist dictator, Recep Tayyip Erdoğan. In 2018 they will create a publication addressing the issue, in an effort to bring this matter into a more public forum. “It’s the new problem now,” Timtik tells me. Two weeks after our first interview, on September 9th, 2017, Ali was violently threatened, verbally and physically, by a currently unknown Turkish assailant with nationalist and Islamist sentiments. He had explained that right now “80 percent of Turkish people in Germany are pro-Erdoğan because they are Islamists, and only 20 percent are chiefly leftists, or more liberal.” When liberals demonstrate, Timtik says, Erdoğan supporters “get scared.” It was after one such left-wing rally, with German politician and chairperson of the Left Party, Katja Kipping, that he was assaulted—his proximity to the Erdoğan-critical party HDP,¹² a sister party of the left in Turkey, was, according to Timtik in a later conversation, another motivation for the attack. “They see the Left as PKK¹³ terrorists,” he says, continuing that any measures taken by the city to assimilate immigrants through seminars and language courses came much too late. “They should have done this since the 60s but they didn’t do anything! [Immigrants] were ignored and marginalised, no integration efforts were made. It’s Germany’s fault that they have become conservative.” It is because of this radically conservative Turkish community, comprising a significant part of Nord Holland, that Timtik in some ways believes have caused the rest of Kassel to mistrust the area as a whole, or lack regard for its needs.

Uwe Altrock is a professor of urban regeneration and planning at the University of Kassel. He believes Timtik and Volz could do more and that the Ortsbeirat could be more active. “They are normally efficient bodies to address local issues, but somehow the city parliament doesn’t take them too seriously if they are not loud enough. There are louder neighbourhoods [than Nord Holland], it’s related to social capital/ social class.” Additionally, he says, they give away their opportunities to cooperate by not following through. “Whenever I go there they say ‘you’re dean of the faculty now, you can do this and that[...]we

need you to cooperate, let's sit down and talk at length, we need your support.' The ideas are there when you're standing in person with a beer but they will never follow up, that's what they do." Such words brings to mind Judith Butler's own, that this ability to be "loud" is not the only way of affirming rights. "Asserting that a group of people is still existing, taking up space and obdurately living, is already an expressive action, a politically significant event, and that can happen wordlessly in the course of an unpredictable and transitory gathering [...] Showing up, standing, breathing, moving, standing still, speech, and silence are all aspects of a sudden assembly, an unforeseen form of political performativity that puts livable life at the forefront of politics. And this seems to be happening before any group lays out its demands or begins to explain itself in proper political speech."¹⁴

This antagonism appears bilateral, as Timtik describes a situation involving other representatives of the university, not namely Altrock but other representatives, and the Dean, who are inflexible in their positions. According to him, they only superficially care to work with the community, the desires of the university being ultimately inexorable. Funded and authorised by the broader state of Hesse, the university doesn't explicitly need approval of locals for growth or expansion, or for development projects in general. They're only required to ask if it interferes with pedestrian sidewalks, traffic, or if it directly affects shops, "but even if they object, explains Timtik, "the problem will escalate to the rules under Hesse, and Hessen always favours the university." Furthermore, when Timtik tried talking to AStA (the student council) about organising and trying to meet with local groups outside the university to talk about issues together he was met with equally poor results. "They don't want to hear any critique," he says, asserting that they too are not that committed to collaboration—considering the university as the biggest part of Nordstadt community while disregarding the needs and opinions of the district at large.

Because unemployment is so high, Timtik explains, you respectively have housing issues. “There is a lot of overcrowding, where one or more families live together.” This is the result of kin growing up and continuing to live together, up to three generations in a single apartment, as well as some who live with non-relations to save on rent. Government-subsidised apartment blocks are not well maintained, so in the winter they can be very cold, and some are far away from any market or small shop. Timtik tells me people living in those buildings tend to feel isolated. Ironically, the weapons industry is adjacent to Nordstadt, where you can sometimes see tanks late at night drive down the streets being transported between locations. “People who are fleeing war and violence come and live in Nord Holland,” explains Timtik, “and here there is this huge weapons manufacturing industry, which produces the armament used in the countries they are fleeing. It has an extremely damaging psychological effect.”

Ayşe Güleş, meanwhile, says there are also distinctions and exclusions that come from within the Nord Holland community. “When Bulgarians come, the people say, ‘oh they are changing our neighborhood so much.’ They don’t want these people in Nordstadt.” She explains that these attitudes come from all corners, where it isn’t simply top-down coming from people of Turkish background. Professor Altrock also asserts that various groups exploit one another, arguing that it’s “older migrants” who can also exploit the rental situation. “Urban development tries to stabilize the situation, then it’s the old Turkish who try to exploit the new Bulgarians,” he says. “They have the apartments and they rent them out and contribute to the increase.” This is done, according to Altrock, as both owner-landlords and as tenants who then subdivide their apartments. “Bulgarians aren’t here because they understand the Turkish language,” he continues. “It was cheap, and when the Bulgarians establish themselves, they will exploit the new Bulgarians coming in and the Arabs coming in, etcetera.”



Elaph Market on Rothfels Straße, Nordstadt.

Timtik adds that the disconnect between the majority Turkish population and Bulgarian immigrants is also related to language issues, suggesting this Balkan community hasn't tried as hard as the Turkish or Kurdish population to integrate linguistically—an opinion that felt strange coming from Timtik, since he too was once unable to speak German. In a conversation with bell hooks, Melissa Harris-Perry points to the practice of prejudicially individualising blame by shaming impoverished people for their own subjugation. “It’s much easier to believe that we can solve social inequality by pulling up our pants or keeping our legs closed,” she affirms, “it allows you to

wipe away all of the structural realities that require collective action and that require work that goes over and past your own life.” She continues that it is a spurious and dangerous belief to think that “as long as I make a different decision, I will never be vulnerable to poverty, or to heartache or to pain.” Because, Harris-Perry continues, that is what prevents people from organising. Shaming, she concludes, “is a defence mechanism to keep people from having to do the hard work[...]saying ‘if you had just made different choices then everything would be fine.’”¹⁵ It is important to think about shame in relation to precarious populations, because it operates on differing levels of social strata, throughout this area of research and beyond. Shaming can create binaries and reduce systemic problems into ‘lifestyle issues’—creating baseless hierarchies that increasingly dividing us.

Organisations and Places:

According to Volz, there can never be enough supermarkets, post offices, and banks. “It’s quite vital to have them near to where you live, and quite necessary to have choices between different markets, he says.” These businesses create jobs and strengthen livability, as do community organisations. Nordstadt boasts important organisations promoting community engagement and supporting interstitial dialogue. Such places are Nordstadt Stadion sports field, which is owned by the town but managed by FC. Bosphorus, a local football association, founded in 1980 by Turkish Gastarbeiter with internationalist intentions. Ahlam Shibli, an artist exhibiting at documenta 14, took photographs of their dining hall. In her text accompanying the work, she writes they were originally “called Genclerbirliği (The Youth Union),” housed at the Kulturzentrum Schlachthof (a cultural center who run community activities, language courses, and events) but departed because of “leftist inclinations of the board.” Its alleged Communism worried parents who began

preventing their children from joining the club.¹⁶ Its current location, a pavilion outside the Stadion, acts as a clubhouse where the Turkish Folk Song Choir has space to rehearse. Locals, including many retired Gastarbeiter, come to play games, dine at the restaurant, convene and engage in various community activities. Located on Mombach Straße there is also Club Juvenil (Youth Club), founded in 1974 by Spanish Gastarbeiter, to counter the cultural deprivation of young immigrants.¹⁷ They were also one of the founding groups of the Kulturzentrum Schlachthof, where they continue to organise activities since 1978.

The IB-Group¹⁸ had an initiative called Boxcamp, the aim of which was to promote and strengthen life skills, physical fitness, reduce aggression, and guide integration processes for struggling youth through the activity of boxing. The owners have now sold the building but the project has been lucky enough to find another venue, in Nordstadt, in a building they share with a car wash/wellness facility. Altrock tells that the old location “was also a training centre for different jobs, such as workshops in wood and metal, and it was pretty good, but they have not found a new home.” The university was not involved, just neighbourhood management groups, but many of Altrock’s graduates become neighbourhood managers. One neighbourhood management organisation he has worked with is Jafka: “they do social work and deal with ‘problematic migrant youth’—usually sent to neighbourhoods with a higher concentration of poor residents.” One project was supporting a local magazine for refugees by refugees. The University of Kassel acted as cooperation partners involving students, many of whom live in the area, but the project was financially supported by BAMF¹⁹ (Federal Office for Migration and Refugees). City Hall does not fund these projects its “the EU, the job centre or other public agencies,” but Altrock reports, work like this which supports the health of communities is sadly being progressively cutback.

Kulturzentrum Schlachthof

The Kulturzentrum Schlachthof perhaps draws the most veritable influence in Nord Holland as Kassel's oldest sociocultural centre. Ayşe Güleç came to Kassel in 1986 to study social education/work at the University of Kassel. Since 1998 she has worked for the Schlachthof and lays out its history: "In the mid-1970s it was the first generation of students from the university; Italian, Spanish, Greek and Turkish immigrant groups, as well as architects and artists." Coming together, they demanded a cultural centre with an expanded and "holistic" mission. They wanted to promote diversity and autonomy—in the spirit of self-organised spaces for individual projects or activities and places to read together, listen to live music or drink tea. Güleç describes it as "actions in the neighbourhood, with the neighbourhood." Now Schlachthof has diversified and professionalised. "They have a department for education, which is significant because this department deals with immigrants and new people coming as refugees." They offer accredited German language courses, financial advice and information about governmental resources. Another department is the youth centre, supporting cultural education, media, music and leisure programmes, as well as pedagogical projects with artists.

"Initially, it was a fundamental aim for the Schlachthof to be an open neighbourhood meeting point," Güleç contends. "But in the last years, it's become so difficult to collect funding. They don't have a fixed source of revenue, so they always need money, and it's not likely when you say, 'I want to make a community centre, give me money.' In the 90s, the minister of Hessen cut the budget of all social projects, so everyone had to find new sources of income," Güleç says. "The best thing to do in Germany, to assure public funding, is to say 'I'm offering German language courses.' You can see they currently focus a lot on these kinds of integration courses." She criticises the new structure but accepts it as an appropriate adjustment. "They

are constructing a new building for their concert hall. The former one was tiny.” Newer projects such as these require a lot of financial support, but it’s unfortunate that, as Güleç explains, “now there is no space to generate activities in the afternoons with women from this neighbourhood, like drinking tea together, as they used to do.”

documenta and the City

Proudly dubbed “documenta City” after the eponymous quinquennial initiated by a group of art enthusiasts, and founded by Arnold Bode in 1955, art performs a pivotal role in Kassel. The first exhibition was politically and socially instrumentalised to bring Germany out of the cultural regression of Nazism. In post-fascist, reconstruction era Germany, Kassel (inside the US occupation zone) was geopolitically symbolic as a border city between East and West Germany, and thusly embedded in Cold War era soft-power dynamics.²⁰ Even the changing of spelling from the German use of “k” in the word, to “c” reveals a statement (dokument vs document). As Canadian artist Ian Wallace describes it, the first documenta was a celebration of individualism and freedom of expression, legitimised through a shared language of modernism and abstraction within an ideological direction of Western alignment.²¹ That year recorded 130,000 visitors,²² now this year’s iteration (*d14*) reports 891,500 visitors to Kassel and 339,000 visits to Athens, Greece—where it was held in equal proportion for the first time as the first of a twofold structure.²³ The enterprise, documenta gGmbH, is both public and private, managed as a nonprofit organization. One half is supported and financed by the city of Kassel, the greater state of Hesse, and the German Federal Cultural Foundation. The other half is funded by private companies who make donations to each edition. In her essay *Learning from Kassel*, Güleç affirms that the exhibition continues to play a significant role on a national, as well as a local level, citing the German naturalisation

test where there appears questions referring to documenta. “It is so important, in fact, that knowledge of it is required in a test that determines national boundaries of belonging and defines a cultural hegemony,” she writes.²⁴ Likewise, in the context of governmental control and entrenchment, the city’s incumbent Mayor is always automatically also the chair of documenta’s supervisory board.

documenta traditionally runs for 100 days (aside from the 163 days of *d14*, including its time in Athens), and there are mixed feelings, locally, towards the exhibition that “brings the world to Kassel.” Many mourn its leaving—what some perceive as a vacuum of critical dialogue or a dissipation of creative energy—while some are unsurprisingly indifferent. Even those that I worked with fell on disparate ends of the spectrum of opinion. My flatmate, who studies at the Kunsthochschule (college of fine art) in the city, for example, was “happy to get the city back.” Feeling that the influx of tourists can only be borne temporarily. They were eager for restaurants in the centre to resume their “pre-documenta” prices. Conversely, colleagues who live in Kassel like Ayşe Güleç, Christopher Vogel (also a member of *d14*’s Chorus), and others, remarked how unfortunate it is that it ends just as it could grow and have a greater continued engagement with locals, such as students, many of whom return to the city for their studies just as the exhibition comes to a close. And some lament that financial investment only comes to Kassel when incentivised as “cultural tourism”—such as documenta or UNESCO heritage site, Bergpark Wilhelmshöhe. However, the exhibition has grown as a significant place for debate around contemporary culture and current political contexts, and many residents perform varying levels of ownership over it.

For *d14*, artistic director Adam Szymczyk decentered the exhibition, not only by de-localising it from Kassel—situating it equally in Athens—but by spreading it beyond the city’s Mitte (centre) and positioning key venues throughout Nordstadt. One of these was

the Glass Pavilions on Kurt-Schumacher-Straße, described as a “sociopolitical boundary.”²⁵ Was the area a natural choice for documenta to grow because of its past collaborations with the Kulturzentrum Schlachthof (culture centre slaughterhouse) or were there more sociopolitical reasons? I wondered if this expansion implied a deepened alliance and acknowledgement of the community—if it would constitute a collegial role or would the endeavour be an act of art-colonialism and paternalism. The *d14* website describes the Mitte as a “homogeneous commercial and cultural hub,” whereas historically Nordstadt is a place where “Kassel becomes home” for migrant communities. How did the organisers align themselves “politically” with the community and not “sympathetically”?

In *Teaching to Transgress*, bell hooks speaks of this incongruity which can take place between action and theory:

The possession of a term does not bring a process or practice into being; concurrently one may practice theorizing without ever knowing/possessing the term, just as we can live and act in feminist resistance without ever using the word “feminism.” Often individuals who employ certain terms freely—terms like “theory” or “feminism”—are not necessarily practitioners whose habits of being and living most embody the action, the practice of theorizing or engaging in feminist struggle. Indeed, the privileged act of naming often affords those in power access to modes of communication and enables them to project an interpretation, a definition, a description of their work and actions, that may not be accurate, that may obscure what is really taking place.”²⁶

The first example towards recognition of political alliance can be found in the affective and symbolic gesture of opening the very first day of the exhibition in Athens on April 6, the day of remembrance for Halit Yozgat, who was killed by neo-Nazis at his family’s Internet café on Holländische Straße in Nordstadt. In fact, the exhibition used its opening and closing dates to “mourn the deaths of two murder victims who represent all other victims of racist-motivated acts of



Former location of the Yozgat's family internet cafe, where Halit was murdered, now an organic honey shop, Nordstadt.

violence and whose murders also point to state-sanctioned violence.”²⁷ In many ways, vulnerable populations that are overlooked due to their precarity, argues Butler, “might operate, or is operating, as a site of alliance among groups of people who do not otherwise find much in common and between whom there is sometimes even suspicion and antagonism.”²⁸ This opening gesture of *d14* forged bonds between artists, cultural producers, educators, immigrants, refugees and activists—all of whom operate under their own conditions of precarity.

Against a Culture of the Spectacle

Much of the success of non-extractive practices in documenta 14 find their nexus with activist and social worker Güleç who has professionally collaborated with the quinquennial since documenta 12. However, in 2002, she had a brief encounter with documenta 11 organisers. They put her in touch with Thomas Hirschhorn who wanted to be introduced to some people in Nordstadt where he would build his installation *Bataille Monument*. “I only moderated some of the first meetings,” she tells me, and perhaps if Güleç was consulted further the project would have been met with less criticism. That work specifically, Till Timm remembers, was situated on Friedrich-Wöhler-Straße, further north in Nordstadt, which he says “is supposed to be this ghetto place.” These houses were built in the 30s and 40s, Timm tells me, as part of the city’s social housing, or *Siedlung* in German. “It’s really cheap housing where you have a lot of social and criminal problems, but nothing severe. This is Kassel, not Compton or something like that—so no drive-by shooting—but there are drug problems, and you better lock the door when you leave your house and stuff like that, nothing to really worry about,” he says, suggesting I go there and have a look myself.

I did go there, spending many days riding my bike around Nord Holland to get to know the area better; to talk to, and observe, people. The vibe around the cluster of housing blocks was familiar, no perceptible “threat”, but I did notice that more people seemed to be leaning on their windowsills, looking around, but this didn’t impress me as dangerous. After all, I was a “New Yorker” who grew up on west 45th Street in the 80s. I wasn’t scared of anything. When I asked my flatmates, they noted that to them, and their experience on what the social cues in Kassel were, this was “ghetto” behaviour. It reminded me of the difference between the broadly accepted perception of more impoverished neighbourhoods, where people hang out on the streets versus affluent ones where people socialised behind closed doors, or



Fenced-off community garden, Nordstadt.

in sanctioned areas of public parks. But even in a park setting, there are so many social signifiers delineating class. Separately, this is an exceedingly broad topic, one I can not currently or quickly unpack, but I was acutely aware of the impression described to me by Germans who did not have a migrant background, as compared to those that did.

Meanwhile, the problematics of the *Bataille Monument* work are succinctly summed up by art historian and writer, Graham Coulter-Smith who notes: “It would appear that we have some contradictions here, on the one hand Hirschhorn wants ‘reality,’ which in the case of the *Bataille Monument* means the milieu of socially marginalised people who need work; and on the other hand he declares that he is an artist and not a social worker: which indicates that he recognises and, understandably, values his extremely privileged position as an international fine art star.”²⁹ It seems Hirschhorn was criticised for using Nordstadt as a backdrop to support his “street credibility.” And it may be one reason why Güleç is so proactive, as well as conscious of the ways in which artists formulate community engagement.

It wasn’t until *d12*, when director Roger M. Buergel and curator Ruth Noack wanted the exhibition to have a deeper thematic and practical relationship with the local population, that Güleç got truly involved. “At that time they made this documenta advisory board and I invited something like 40 people from Kassel, because I think they [Buergel and Noack] were really interested in the content and also they had a special view of Kassel, the old Kassel. We began a process of learning together by having monthly meetings,” she says, of what would be one of the “first structural attempts to move out, find, address, and cooperate with various segments of the population.”³⁰

For documenta 14, Güleç was appointed “community liaison”, but her work is more involved than the title suggests. “I would say it’s not only community liaison, but it’s also curating the city of documenta,” she says. “Because it was my decision whom I bring together with [artists such as] Ahlam Shibli or with Mounira Al Solh, or whom I prefer to translate the work of Hans Haacke.” If extraction is a result of artistic practices antithetical to solidarity, then Güleç’s role as a mediator and curator is a keen example of how to work in healthier, coherent methods. If you work with people or communities, it’s always a case of trust. As bell hooks asserts, “creating trust usually means finding

out what it is we have in common as well as what separates us and makes us different.”³¹ The trust of people who were included in some artworks, in documenta 14, had trust in Güleç because many people knew her from previous community work and from the Schlachthof. “They know my work for many years with different people—they have an idea of what to expect,” she says. This allows for a certain level of confidence in the process of collaboration so that they pre-trust the artists as well because Güleç facilitates the process.

The work of consociating artists with “subjects” from Nordstadt could be inferred as tokenising. But as Güleç clarifies, if there is mutuality in comprehending what all interlocutors desire and can expect then “they have trust in the content as well—to build up all these different channels of trust is something that I can do, I think.” Furthermore an important aspect is transmission—“how you speak to people and how you explain your ideas, not the fact of explaining something, but *how* you explain it.” Güleç understands that every institution has a limit of interaction, and concludes, “not everyone is interested in exhibitions, it depends who you ask and how they engaged with documenta.” For the people collaborating with artists Shibli or Al Solh, “their experience was meaningful and long-lasting.” It’s not like the encounters of visitors who come for a few days, or like those of other collaborations where, “they come into the city, bringing this art, and three months later it’s finished again.” Güleç reached out to over 50 people in Kassel, old residents and new who felt the experience was fascinating and important. She spoke of refugees “who came only three years ago to Kassel—for whom documenta was no big thing—but they had a positive experience with artists, and it’s more relevant to them now.”

My Work as an Educator

I lived in Kassel to work for *d14* in the department of education as a “Chorus” member. That was the misnomer for art mediators who facilitated tours with the audience—each participant paying 12€ to go on a “walk” with one of us. As my colleague Mika Ebbesen eloquently stated—we were a “diverse group of adults entrusted to carry the emotional beat of this grand cultural happening.”³² I was excited, like Ebbesen, ready to join the *esprit de corps*—take down the establishment, dismantle the patriarchy and white supremacy, through the critical dialogue of contemporary art. In one class session professor and theorist Irit Rogoff commented, “you don’t have a subjective experience, you do have a *subjectivity* in that experience.” I would carry this sentiment with every walk.

Nearly every day, leading my groups between venues, I walked from the Neue Neue Galerie, (on the border between Mitte and Nordstadt) through the graffitied underground tunnel, to the Gottschalk Hall. I asked myself along the way, “does my presence charge these places with unintentional meaning?” Many times, I felt like I don’t belong in Nord Holland, that I don’t belong in Kassel, I can’t even speak German. I’m simply an opportunistic art student, who is profiting in the same way an ice cream pop up shop does at the beach in the summer. How was I caring for the community that I was working in and would write about, and how could I enter a praxis of congruity? Firstly, I needed to be more informed.

Thinking through bell hooks, I embarked on the notion of “radical pedagogy”—a collective experience that insists “that everyone’s presence is acknowledged.” To do this, hooks states the person in the role of pedagogue must “genuinely *value* everyone’s presence.” This valuing upholds the dynamic that each person is responsible for the act of looking and discussing together. “These contributions are resources,” hooks writes, “used constructively they enhance the

capacity of any class to create an open learning community.”³³ Our bond to learn doesn’t come from the individual or the group but stimulates an exercise of freedom from “what is between us, from the bond we make at the moment in which we exercise freedom together, a bond without which there is no freedom at all.”³⁴

One approach to a self-reflexive view of my presence in Kassel was to consider the potential dangers of repeating colonial hierarchies between privileged Westerners and disenfranchised and Otherised subjects. This came up in many discussions on artworks that focussed on Nordstadt and how we as a group could unpack the limitations of exhibitions, while also reflecting on the imagined potential solidarity made possible through artistic production. Problematic representation and commodification of “disaster/crisis art”—i.e. artists who commodify disaster or poverty by mining it as a “natural resource”—were regular polemics in our group conversations.

The processes of cultural valorisation tied to exhibiting in documenta and the prevailing narrative about art and culture’s deep humanist worth were both critical points of departure for this year’s exhibition. Topics related to migration, economic and ecological violence, indigenous knowledge, sanctimonious notions of democracy, Europe in “crisis” and militarism were not aesthetic backdrops but were the sociopolitical highways supporting dialogue, consensus and discord. If you began by following the documenta 14 map, the first work you encounter is *Monday* (2017), by artist collective iQhiya. It immediately confronts its audience on the violence embedded in education, especially with regards to the systemic injustice (lessons) of the “hidden curriculum.”³⁵ This was a significant theme in relation to this year’s appellation and concept *Learning From Athens*. By beginning in the underground station and literally following the light at the end of the tunnel, visitors arrive at the first of the main venues, Neue Neue Galerie. From here, I will point to some works that place themselves both physically and contextually in Nord Holland.



Pedestrian underpass to travel between Mitte and Nordstadt.
Frequently parties will spring up spontaneously on the weekend.

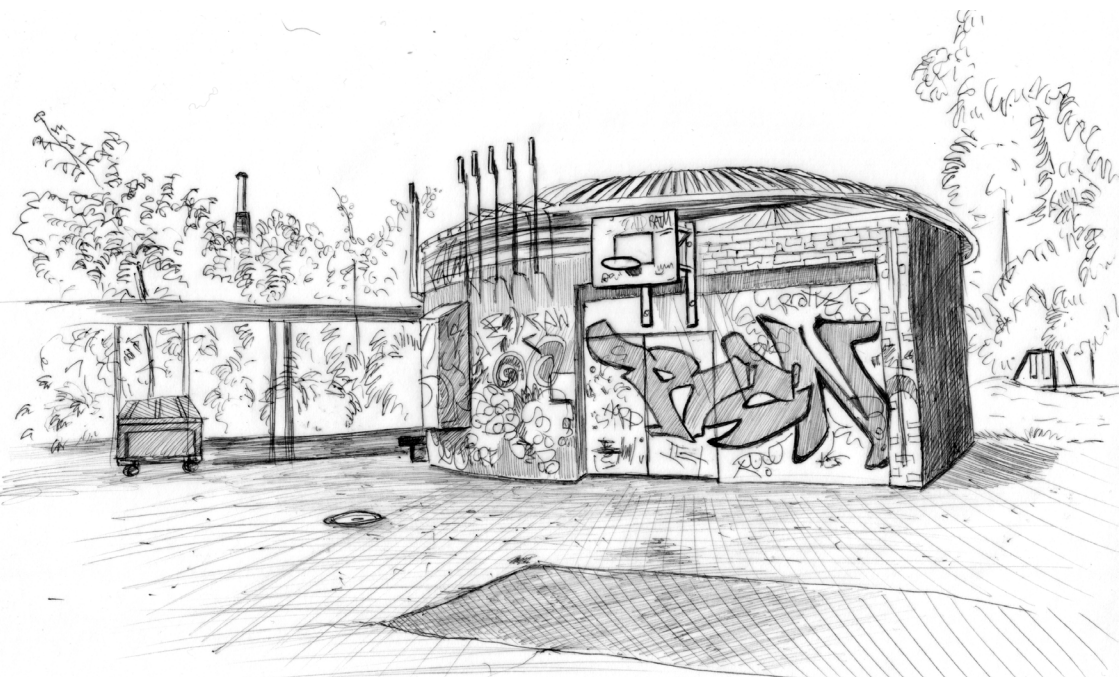
Artists like Shibli took considerable interest in this region, not as symbolic representation of inclusion, but with the practice of sober and careful artistic research and activism. Her process and methodology was accomplished via insertion and not extraction.³⁶ Originally from Palestine, Shibli lived in Kassel for over a year, and with the help of Güleç, she was able to embed herself in the community, documenting locally-situated knowledge. Her series of photographs coincide with a text—which carried the voice of individuals—each supporting the other. Because so much more information came from the writing, rather than illustrated through the image, many of my group discussions worked with the notion of “staged,” “spontaneous,” and “journalistic.” Somehow Shibli presented a more accessible approach to the complex stories she provided, without being patronising. “Each situation is essentially problematic (she does not thematise), and the central problem is one of home and borders, both mental and territorial,” writes Jean-François Chevrier, “Shibli knows that oppression, censure, and disinformation are not only practiced by the winners. She has learned to be wary of the pathos of the victim, in order to better get at the confused reality of reactions to oppression.”³⁷

On Kurt-Schumacher-Strasse, Lebanese-Dutch artist Mounira Al Solh reconstructed her father’s bakery. Established in Beirut in 1984, she worked there as a child alongside people with disabilities, until it was bombed years later by militant groups. Named after her dad, “Nassib’s Bakery” served as both a “monument and social space,” and sold “Manakish—a Levantine specialty consisting of a thin dough with a layer of thyme or other toppings.”³⁸ Lining the walls of the business were dozens of portrait drawings, entitled *I Strongly Believe in Our Right to Be Frivolous*, paired with accounts of forced displacement of North African and Middle Eastern migrants—people Al Solh met in Kassel and Athens. Many are making, or have made, the transition from refugee to citizen and the artist symbolically documented their words, in their mother tongue (mostly Arabic) on sheets of yellow

legal paper, reminiscent of bureaucratic ephemera. Alongside the oral histories of her subjects is the story of her father's bakery in Lebanon, hand-painted on the walls. By doing so, the installation acts not only as mimesis but as a place to remember and a space of paradox. It remains detached, and shifts in meaning and experience as these surroundings are not the place of origin. That's in that same way that Al Solh's transcription of oral histories in Arabic also creates a shift by modifying the way it is usually written—uprooting the classical style of written Arabic that is entirely different from spoken usage.

In Nordstadt park, a sculpture by Hungarian-born American conceptual artist, Agnes Denes references the history of geometric utopian abstraction. This work called for participation but somehow it didn't have the significance of relating to the neighborhood the way Al Solh or Shibli's work did. There was an authenticity in the way their approach encountered the community in Nord Holland, working with migrants who, in some cases, came from the artist's own home countries. This in no way means Denes' work should be disregarded, but, as hooks asserts, there is authority in experience—"the specialness of those ways of knowing rooted in experience[...]that experience can be a way to know and can inform how we know what we know." While the writer is opposed to an "essentialist practice that constructs identity in a monolithic, exclusionary way" she continues that one should not conversely "relinquish the power of experience as a standpoint on which to base analysis or formulate theory." As an example hooks writes, "I am disturbed when all the courses on black history or literature at some colleges and universities are taught solely by white people, not because I think that they cannot know these realities but that they know them differently."³⁹

Rick Lowe is an American artist and community organiser whose project for *d14*, in Kassel, transformed the maps of the exhibition to rename Holländische Straße (Dutch Street) to Halit Straße (Halit Street). His work directly assimilated dialogue with residents and



Basketball court in Nordstadt park.

activists of Nordstadt who have been wanting to do the same but have not yet been granted city approval. Halit Yozgat was the ninth victim to be murdered by members of the National Socialist Underground (NSU). These neo-Nazis are not merely a fringe organisation of terrorists, but are part of a more massive complex of systemic racism, argues The Society of Friends of Halit. It is a part of a widespread societal shirking, culpable in enabling institutionalised, structural racism. The nonprofit, volunteer activist group collaborated with Forensic Architecture whose work in *d14, 77sqm_9:26min*, also expands on Yozgat's assassination. The work, an investigation which acts as counter forensic analysis, was first presented in May, 2017, at the NSU Tribunal in Cologne and the German Parliamentary commission. The work argues, using scientific methodology, of the

implausibility of non-involvement by the now exonerated Andreas Temme—who was present in the cafe at the time of the shooting. The evidence concludes that this undercover agent, who had infiltrated the NSU, was either lying (when he testified to authorities that he saw, heard, and smelled nothing) or committed the murder himself.

Seeking justice through the apparatus of the state denies and reinforces structures of injustice in the first place—a contradiction posed inadvertently by the NSU Tribunal when the video, *77sqm_9:26min*, was declared inadmissible at court proceedings. It begs to question how flawed people feel the “system” is and might we need to consider alternative modes of non-governmental democracy and social justice. Most of my Chorus colleagues were from abroad, all of them from democratic nations who shared a consensus of dejection regarding the failures of the justice systems of their respective nations. In a way, the project by Forensic Architecture learned a lot from Kassel—in terms of the corrupt state of politics, and how bureaucracy is used to suit the agendas of the already dominant. We spoke about forums for truth, asking, where were the alternative spaces for discourse beyond state institutions in order to affect change? How could non-governmental organisations and artist practices, which experiment, and examine racism and anti-migration xenophobia, progressively confront the debased state of democracy?

Angela Melitopoulos’ *Crossings* (2017), was presented at the University of Kassel’s Giesshaus. Her work, a four-channel video and 16-channel sound installation, investigated the process of environmental extraction and subsequent pollution in Greece—from classical times up to the present. She also recorded life in some of the refugee camps dispersed around the country, such as Idomeni, bordering Macedonia, and the Moria Camp on the island of Lesbos. I didn’t visit this work with any of my Chorus groups, but I wondered if local refugees in Nord Holland and Kassel, in general, came to see *Crossings*, which was free to enter. I wondered how they would react to the testimonies of other asylum seekers, and how the anecdotes of police violence and

uninhabitable living conditions reflected their own lived experiences. Given the work was placed in a part of the city where many refugees dwell, I was curious whether they knew about it. I also contemplated whether documenta 14 organisers reached out to make such an engaging project more publicly known. In an article by cultural critic T J Demos, *Crossings* is succinctly expanded on, and with the majority of Turkish residents pro Erdoğan and with anti-PKK (Kurdistan Workers' Party) sentiments (according to Ali Timtik), I also thought the position of the video in Nordstadt was a catalyst for discussions.

The video includes interviews with refugee camp inhabitants who are also members of the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK). They discuss their self-critical and affirmatively feminist political culture and support for Kurdish leader and PKK founder Abdullah Öcalan, who, remarkably influenced by US social ecologist Murray Bookchin's theories of libertarian municipalism, has attempted to develop autonomy beyond the state in northern Syria and Turkey. For his efforts, he has been jailed by the latter since 1999. The movement nonetheless continues in the autonomous zone of Rojava, established in 2012, currently being defended against the Islamic State and Turkey alike by the YPG, the People's Protection Units, the armed wing of the PKK, which camp interviewees commemorate in martyr posters and protest slogans shown in the video. Still, this is a volatile situation: While migrant children are shown learning words for care and love in new languages, protesters chant 'Fuck the EU', as the video depicts an explosive context oscillating between constructive community building within migrant culture and potentially violent revolutionary uprising.⁴⁰

What Continues?

It may be the lack of rooting in which each documenta takes place that inadvertently is the cause of sluggish gentrification. As Güleç points out

Every documenta has a clearly defined timetable. Its five-year rhythm begins with the naming of the artistic director and ends after 100 exhibition days. The exhibition comes down. The team disperses. Only a small, organisational core of people stays on site. The network of the documenta 12 advisory board ended with the exhibition in September 2007. What remains are many experiences and personal contacts, but no binding commitment or concerted form of continuing the work together.⁴¹

I can personally attest to this feeling of abandonment. If it were not for social media, I would have very few encounters with my Chorus colleagues who continue, though minimally, to have conversations on Facebook. I also agree with Güleç when she asserts that “there is tremendous potential to be found in collaborations between art institutions and local or non-art savvy communities.”⁴² These collaborations could be of greater benefit if they were less transitory. On the other hand, in the long term, it may be useful for communities that documenta almost entirely starts over with each new passing—disallowing conventional capitalism to germinate off cultural production, as can be seen when locals notice higher restaurant prices every five years, for 100 days. Till Timm remembers a place called Kleiner Onkel cafe which just opened for documenta, only to close immediately afterwards. Before that, about one-and-a-half years ago, existed one of the longest living “half-legal” concert venue with small shows in Kassel. “It was amazing,” Timm declares. The place was called Das Haus and ran previously for 23 years, producing gigs, readings, and parties. “When the building changed owners, he kicked them out, thinking he could make some real money during documenta.”

It may help to consider the ways in which an organisation can take root without taking over. There are other ways in which documenta continues to leave its mark through art, and this is through the process of procurement. Before *d(13)*, there was no systematic acquisition policy for documenta works.⁴³ Since then, the city has taken an interest in collecting certain pieces, and at the closing of the exhibition a handful is always purchased. There is now an official *Ankaufskommission* (acquisition committee) that advises on what to buy that is most representative of the breadth of the exhibition. Remarkably, the city has acquired 16 public works, seen all around Kassel, including the prodigious project 7000 Eichen (7000 Oaks) by Joseph Beuys, which quite literally transformed the cityscape.

The process is always met with local advocacy and opposition. “It’s always fun to have these big discussions about ‘what are they doing?’” Says Timm, “If you read the letters sent to the newspaper—well you can imagine what it’s like. If somebody who’s not into documenta is writing the letter—‘why is it like that? How much money does it cost?!’ But after more than a couple of decades Kassel finally found out that it’s a good thing I think!” Yet, this year was still met with its share of conflict. The sculpture by Nigerian-born American-based artist Olu Oguibe, an obelisk titled *Monument to Strangers and Refugees*, which received far-reaching praise (winning the prestigious Arnold Bode Prize) was nevertheless met with turbulence when it came time to purchase. Oguibe was officially asking for a considerable €600,000 but this was not the only argument against the work. A far-right conservative from the AfD party (which is represented in Kassel’s parliament) made reference to the work as “entstellt” (disfiguring)—a tenet of Nazi propaganda and rhetoric against art that didn’t conform to their racist ideology. Situated on Königsplatz, the approximately fifty-two-foot tall obelisk bears the inscribed words “I was a stranger, and you took me in”—a quote from the Gospel of Matthew—written in Turkish, English, Arabic, and German. The monument evokes the spirit of hospitality, and references the thousands of refugees and

migrants Germany has received since 2014.

What is interesting to me is the campaign that has started on Oguibe's behalf, already procuring €85,000, including funds from a local foundation.⁴⁴ It will be ultimately the citizens who will decide to contribute enough money for the sculpture, and there is also a possibility to negotiate a lower fee after assessing the final results of the funding drive. It's a muddled conflict, on the one hand an artist, rightly, should receive the sum they ask. Then again, a work that so sententiously predicates itself as a symbol against racism and xenophobia might acknowledge the difficulty those same residents might have in financing such work, even if they love it, and sell it at a reduced rate. By law, the City of Kassel cannot pay from its budget for outdoor public works from documenta.⁴⁵ That is why they turn to denizens, and to the wider public, to support such acquisitions—organising public campaigns to raise funds was done for *Idee Di Pietra* by Giuseppe Penone in 2012.⁴⁶ This year, five works have been purchased for the indoor collection, totalling €290,000—a video work by Susan Hiller, objects by Nevin Aladag and Olaf Holzapfel, a painting by Edi Hila and a painting by Miriam Cahn. The director of Neue Galerie, Dorothee Gerken, made the suggestions and Susanne Völker was head of the acquisition committee, along with additional representation. These included leaders of local art and museum associations, such as the Museumslandschaft and the Fridericianum, as well as representatives of the different political groups in the city parliament. In the end, it is the city magistrate that decides.⁴⁷

documenta Gets an Institute

Starting in 2018, construction of the documenta institute, a roughly 4,700 square meter building, will begin on Holländischen Platz, across the street from the University of Kassel. No one I spoke to

knew exactly how “open” the Institute will be, but, Uwe Altrock suggests it’s a positive project, “of course it will hire a small staff and have opportunities for scholars, and will hopefully keep conversations going that rise out of the exhibition.” I wonder how it will straddle the politics around land use and accessibility. The endeavour is a collaboration between the city of Kassel and documenta gGmbH—together working closely with the university—costing an estimated €24 million.⁴⁸ Most of the funding will come from the German federal government—€12 million—with the state of Hesse pledging €6 million, the city of Kassel another €4 million and a final €2 million from private donors.⁴⁹ Altrock thinks its location in Nord Holland, beside the main campus of the University of Kassel is a good thing, given “it repairs the city structure because it will rebuild on top of that stupid parking lot that is as ugly as can be,” he says. “There are some nice trees but it’s just a horrible place. Then by building it here, you’ll have more communication between professors and researchers. I think their openness to issues that are coming up in the neighbourhood will be greater than if they situate it next to City Hall.”

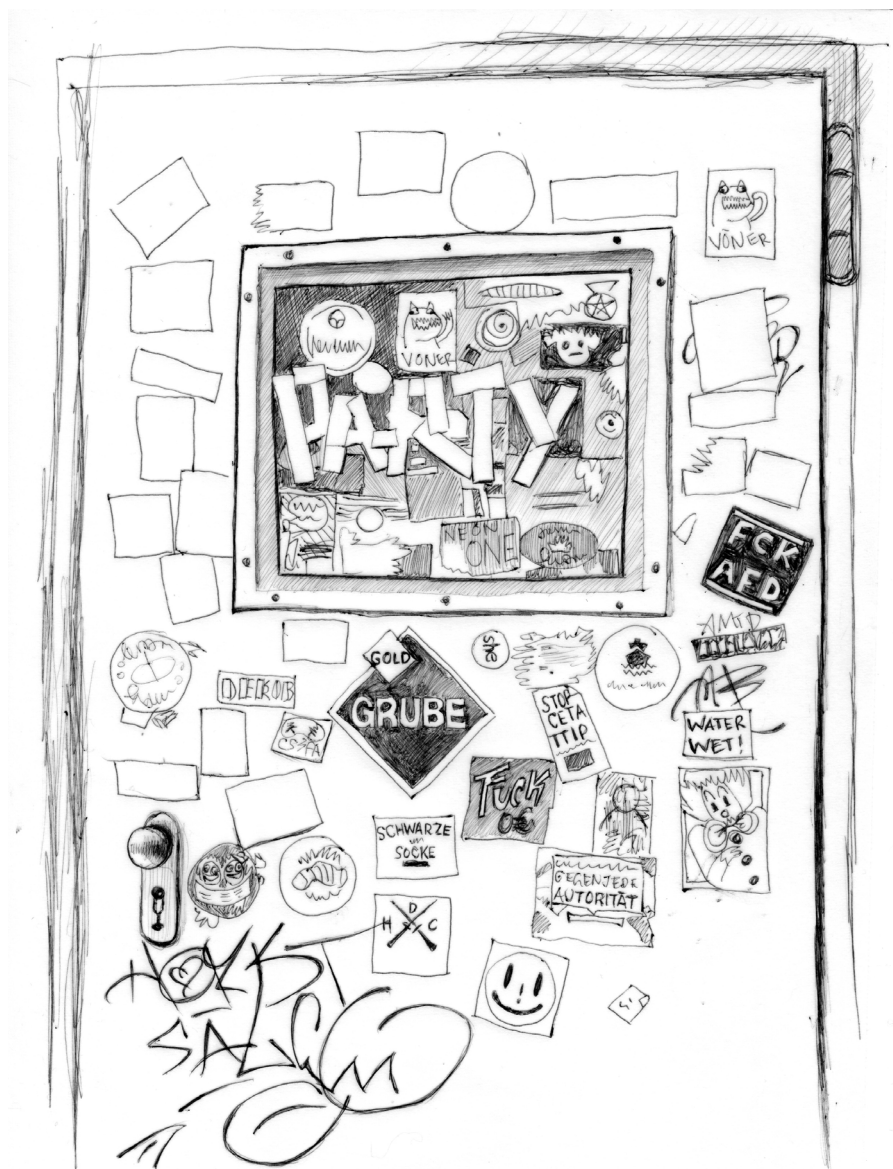
One problem with institutional critique is that it has been institutionalised. As Güleç writes, “art institutions are called upon to challenge, to examine and change their own structures, in order to make them accessible to the widest variety of population centres and interest groups.”⁵⁰ With its location at a nexus of a multitude of struggles, the new documenta institute has the challenging role of negotiating the myriad demands of its mega exhibition identity and its cultural footprint within its surroundings—which can not fall to the periphery by solely focusing on the interests of academics. “The most important factor is transmission, or a desire to learn from one another,” continues Güleç.⁵¹ Gentrification happens when the loudest voices within the current political landscape are heard and made visible. As not to hamper the parity of any one actor—especially of those who are vocally less assertive—searching for the struggles

that have been made invisible could be one methodology for social inclusion at the institute.

Gentrification Seedlings, Part II: A Look at the University of Kassel

The borders of gentrification mainly revolve around the university, because students drive the market upwards with their continuous stream of moving in and out, and—as Hannes Volz points out—many live three or four to a flat and can pay more than any single family can. “The landlords purposely let the contracts expire,” reveals Ali Timtik, “afterwards they will rent only to students, not families.” This practice is most visible around the university, on nearby streets like Gottschalk Straße and Henkel Straße around venues like the Goldgrube, a newer club similar in style to Mutter but for concerts and parties. “That’s the next border for hipness or whatever, for northern Hessen hipness,” says Timm. “People are not going to move further north because it’s not even working class it’s really ghetto style.” In Güleç’s opinion it’s not only the students performing real estate alchemy, the university itself continues to expand. “You don’t notice it from the front,” she says about Gottschalk Straße, “but from the backside.”

Academic institutions are seen as drivers of local economic growth; they are also imbued with implicit self-validation as distributors of credit and reputation, and as havens for knowledge production and “free thought.” Progressively, bodies are born into an unfolding globalised and authoritarian world—where surplus labour is a requirement of neoliberal capitalism—and universities appear as the last means for economic and social mobility. When the University of Kassel was first founded in 1971, it ran on a progressive idea of a tertiary institution. Described as a *Gesamthochschule* (comprehensive school), it was a more inclusive, open, and integrative platform



Door to club Goldrube, Nordstadt.

incorporating many different kinds of pupils, from various economic backgrounds. It transitioned to its more commodifiable form with other European universities during the 90s when the Bologna Process⁵² was in its liminal stages.

It is relevant to understand how schooling functions in Germany. Elementary school comes first, before a pupil is advised by the administration on whether they will continue, either to a *Hauptschule*, a *Realschule* or a *Gymnasium*. Volz explained to me that graduating from any of these three schools does not guarantee a pathway to study at a university. “It’s a speciality in Kassel that up to the 10th term, they can go to those schools, but if they want to make *Abitur* (school leaving examination), they have to change into *Oberstufengymnasium*,” says Volz, “Only students who attend a Gymnasium can then, in turn, go to a university preparatory school.” It’s a horrible system, he tells me, and it means that a child’s future prospects for attending university can be predetermined as early as fourth grade.

Children from lower-income households usually don’t get the *Abitur*, because they are usually placed early on in the lowest ranked *Hauptschule*. “It’s highly separated as to who gets *Abitur* and who does not,” Volz concludes, “Because many people here are migrants, it has nothing to do with their mental ability; it’s kind of the way the school system segregates people. On the other hand, one of the main topics of the Social Democrats was to open the university for people who don’t have the *Abitur* or the *Gymnasium*. One issue of this university was to change the policy and extend enrollment beyond those who have the *Abitur*. But unlike other cities (i.e. Berlin and Hamburg) that have done away with the tiered schooling system, Kassel remains unaltered.” Subsequently, I understand better now as to why, when enquiring as to whether people studying in the University of Kassel were also from Nordstadt, they would wearily answer, “no.” Seemingly, the social divide between the university and local Nordstadters is so embedded in structural classism and

racism that acting as a gentrifying force is not only situated in market-driven speculation but additionally in entirely fundamental disenfranchisement.

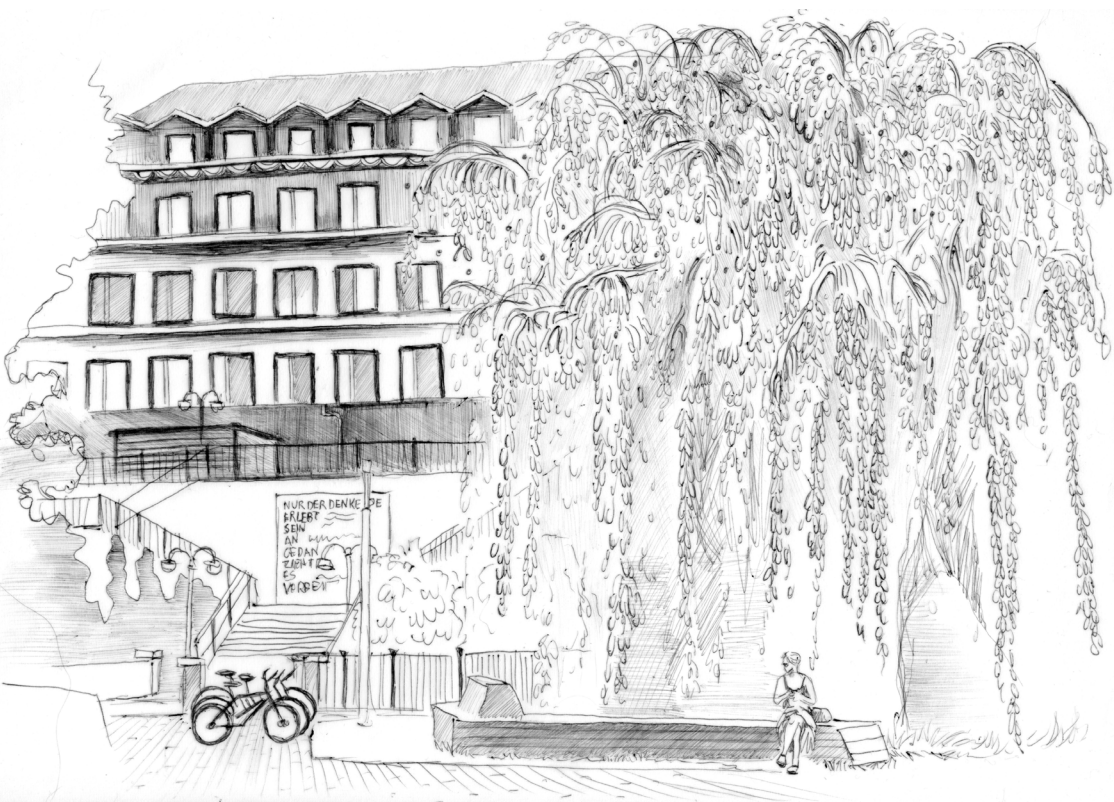
The University of Kassel continues to grow at an accelerated pace. From Altrock's point of view, the impact of expansion is crucial to think about in different ways—one being the affirmative developments for population growth and the other opportunism by the state. “The first part of considerable campus redevelopment was around 1982, and this was seen as a positive change for a very rundown area,” he says, while adding that it did not take up that much space. “When the [Berlin] wall came down, Kassel's location changed from the periphery to the heart of a unified Germany and everyone thought Kassel would take off.” According to Altrock, there was a short-lived boom in the first half of the 90s but in the second half, and early 2000s, Kassel “was in a crisis.” Compared to cities like Hamburg or Berlin that were burgeoning with an entire re-urbanisation wave, Kassel did not. Noticeable economic growth and advancement of the city's entire image, Altrock continues, “didn't really happen until around 2012 to 2013 when important companies began to take root such as SMA and others, and started to be successful[...]so we have some important companies as a direct result of the university at which point the institution itself grew. This was not the result of the university being so smart or so good. It's just that it's political. The state of Hessen knew that there would be a lot of students and financed the expansion to address the prospect of new attendees.” In 2006, when Altrock arrived as a professor, there were 16,000 students, 12 years later, it's over 25,000. Altrock concludes, “But that's not a result of quality. It's just that the state and the university said, ‘okay, we will open up to new people.’ And of course, that could be noticed in the city and in Nordstadt.” That number is huge, comparatively double to both of my undergraduate and graduate universities.

A documenta colleague and friend, Barbara Wiebking, helped

me throughout this dissertation with a lot of incidental German translations, including looking through the university's official development plans and records with me. The following information comes from this document and her generous support. The newest construction plans are considered the biggest change in 40 years, which includes further transformation of the quarter between Moritz Straße, Gottschalk Straße and Mombach Straße—envisioned as an “educational landscape” between Nordstadt Park and the rest of the city. This framework was achieved via a special investment programme called HEUREKA developed by the Hessen state government, approximately €200 million have been made available for the University of Kassel until 2020.⁵³ Unfortunately, this money has been prematurely exhausted,⁵⁴ so there are news plans under an expansion of the coalition agreement of 2014. The new state government has pledged to provide additional funding for the construction period of 2021 to 2025. Furthermore, the University Pact of 2020 will be prolonged, which provides a new planning perspective for future construction. The end of this document gives a summation of past and future expenses until the 2025 year mark, totaling €570,757.789.⁵⁵

The Villa Rühl: Whose Campus is it Anyway?

The funding for the university, in some instances, has been used against requests from community groups and students by “revitalising” certain self-organised spaces on the campus of the University of Kassel, without compromise. One instance was the cherished Lucius-Burckhardt-Platz, demolished two years ago despite fierce appeals from locals and the student union, AStA, who called the action “blind destruction.” Once a bustling location for outdoor community gatherings and “the last green space” on school grounds (home to a biergarten and a student cafe established in the 90s⁵⁶) the space now functions as a bland concrete lacuna between buildings. In the



East side of the renovation to previously named “Lucius-Burckhardt- Platz,” on the grounds of the University of Kassel .

summer of 2017, when I was in Kassel, a new conflict broke out over a Villa on Möncheberg Straße 42. On June 3, 2017, a group of activists, including students, occupied and appropriated the former Villa Rühl building, owned by the state of Hesse but managed by the University of Kassel. Compelled by the school administration, they were forcibly evicted by police 16 days later. Occupiers renamed the space *Unsere Villa* (*Our Villa*) and were interested in building a social centre and place for housing the homeless, with a cohesive and self organised structure—as an independent and non-commercial meeting

place for culture, art and politics. The university argued that demands by occupiers fell out of their jurisdiction and onto the city's area of responsibility, which felt like a deflection to the activists.⁵⁷

Without warning, university officials inspected the building and the situation—it became clear that they would not support the goals of organisers, who saw their collective rejuvenating the space over an extended period. Officials called for an abrupt end to the project, and when squatters failed to comply, the university filed criminal charges against them. Villa activists responded, requesting the university withdraw the complaint as not to criminalise a social commitment. They cited other supporters who called for negotiations such as Die Linke (the Department of Education), the GEW Regionalverband Hochschule und Forschung Nordhessen, and the Mittelbau of the Institute for Urban Development. On their website, voices from the *Unsere Villa* asked themselves why occupy it now, and answered:

Already 26 years ago, people from the neighbourhood tried to convince Mister Rühl of a common usage. The Villa Rühl offers, due to its immense open spaces and the division of rooms, a diversity of potential uses. Especially here—at the border between the districts of Weserspitze and Nordholland which are often labelled as areas with social problems—a public and openly accessible social centre would be of much greater value than a representative conference center for a narrowly limited and selected academic audience.⁵⁸

As the dean of the faculty, Altrock and other administrators sat down with *Unsere Villa* representatives. The negotiating process was nonproductive, as the university saw the squatters as unorganised and undiplomatic and they already had a plan for the building. According to Altrock, “this Villa Rühl issue—Volz and the rest probably criticised the university for what has happened there—but it was very hard to find an appropriate tonality. I think the squatters exaggerated the situation. But I think the president of university dealt with those issues with little empathy.” In general, he tells me, “the president does not see himself as a neighborhood activist—he will always talk

to city hall.” For the university to have a better relationship with the local community, Altrock thinks it’s important to launch more neighborhood related projects. “We, as planners, always think that we are the smartest people in the neighborhood but there are a lot of political scientists and other faculty that do much more,” he says, “Those political scientists and sociologists, should collaborate with us and we’ll be the bridge.” However according to Timtik, the university as a whole doesn’t do enough to reach out to the people who live in Nordstadt, saying, “there should be more dialogue to understand the problems, and not to let the people leave or change but to make an effort to coexist.”

A Coda: Relationships to the District, Futures and Planning Methodology

Till Timm, was the first person I interviewed in Kassel. It was his opinion that it was not a town for artists saying, “if you’re interested in music or art, you sooner or later move to Berlin.” Uwe Altrock echoed these same sentiments—bemoaning his choice to buy an apartment in Kassel, where he lives three days a week, instead of Berlin where he lives the other half of the time and rents. For many people I spoke to, Kassel is not the “important” place for art or music—the reason why gentrification was, for them perhaps, a premature topic. Although I agree the two cities operate completely differently, when it comes to access to culture, my time in Kassel and subsequent research led me to many legacy businesses, and to new establishments, which have been growing in relevance to residents—places like Mutter, which has survived for over 20 years.

Timm was interested in opening up a bar where you could listen to punk music. “Kassel had a punk scene,” he says, “and it was vital up to the mid-80s—afterwards there was a hole, where you couldn’t



Faith moschee (mosque), Nordstadt.

go anywhere to listen to punk music.” Mutter is a pleasant, shabby-casual, alternative space to buy cheap beer and listen to mainly rock or underground music. I went there a few times in the summer but noticed that it was filled primarily with a student crowd. The bar itself hasn’t been a driving force for gentrification but it has benefited from the tremendous increase in students—so have other businesses also near the campus. Yet Mutter still doesn’t make enough money to support Timm’s family, additionally because he co-owns the bar with a partner. To supplement his income Timm freelances, teaching German language courses. As expected, the revenue from his real love, playing in his band *King Khan and the Shrines* where he is the lead guitarist, is sporadic. I asked Timm if he felt the bar had a moral obligation to the community, and he said it does but explained, “it’s hard to tell who the community is.” He doesn’t cater to the tastes of “everyone,” and he also understands, by doing this, certain factions of residents are left out. “We don’t do techno, and we don’t do German hip hop. We love 60s music, and we love punk rock—that’s the main thing. So if you’re into that[...]of course colour doesn’t matter but it’s been mainly a white movement anyways. That’s the thing; punk rock has never been something that was very mixed.”

Timtik and his shop have a completely different relationship with the community. Bei Ali is charged with a more political atmosphere, and he prefers it that way. Opening the cafe with the intention of creating “an open space where people don’t just drink coffee and go—they want to sit a while—to discuss art and culture and politics.” Timtik’s cafe supports many free cultural events, such as small concerts and exhibitions. The events can be critical and highlight social problems but Timtik thinks art can have a message or not, it doesn’t have to be political to be included. I asked him if he thinks that social and political movements tend to overlook or underestimate art as a resource. “Art is a political instrument,” he responds. “It’s a socially critical tool and I don’t know why it’s sometimes underestimated, but I believe that art can change people, and leads to improvements.”

Timtik was part of a project that brought young boys together who were normally fighting, and got them to play football together. Artists organised these teams and they were involved in this project, along with some politicians. Together they developed workshops (i.e. theatre exercises and various activities) “to get people to get outside of their ghettos.” For Timtik, there is no difference between working with artists and working with politicians: “Art and political dialogue *work together*, every path has its way.”

Every space operates under its own set of exclusions, whether calculated or involuntary, and I would never argue for homogeneity. But I agree when Güleç insists that the point isn’t to integrate everyone but to give precedence to those who are at a disadvantage. “If you want to protect this neighborhood, you should take care for people who want to open shops for special things like bakeries, little restaurants, and cafes—not for the students—but for their own communities.” Rising rents make it difficult for locals to open a shop and, even though Germany has some very good laws limiting rent increases for housing—such as *Milieuschutzsatzung*⁵⁹ or the *Mietpreisbremse*⁶⁰—it doesn’t include rent for commercial use.

The offices of the DMB *Mieterbund* (German National Tenants’ Association) are also located in Nordstadt. It’s a non-profit association helping rental disputes between tenants and landlords but this is little consolation for people who rent as a small business. The problem, as Güleç sees it, is that all the newer businesses that are coming cater to the needs of students or people working in the university, and the neighborhood doesn’t only need “hip cafes.” This relates to the autonomy that various communities have in their neighborhoods, which greatly depend on access to goods and services of their culture. As she says, “residents should have the right to open a shop.”

Both Timtik And Timm’s establishments endure differing levels of precarity. Mutter rents from a building owned by the GBG (the

city's non-profit housing corporation). They maintain low rents for Timm, but Timtik is less fortunate, his building is owned by a private landlord who can adjust the rent as market rates increase. Timm, however, will not receive housing subsidies indefinitely, even with the GBG landlords, because the system of social housing only provides 25 to 30 years of reduced rent. After speaking with Altrock, I discovered that every year entire buildings fall out of the system, reducing the stock of social housing by "some 600 apartments," annually. He tells me, "it's still publicly-owned but they are no longer forced to keep the rent low because they no longer get the public support to reduce the rates. It's open to the market forces." If it's is a "nice" public housing company they won't suddenly skyrocket the rate but they could. In Altrock's opinion, the city should build more social housing projects and should take more risks—but still officials measure themselves relative to Hamburg or Berlin, reminding everyone how inexpensive Kassel is by comparison. This justification allows the city to decline the idea of new projects to support the economically vulnerable. The state will maintain, says Altrock, that there is "a healthy increase in rents, stating 'it's none of our business to build, it's the private companies' business to build.'" Another given pretext is population decline. Though it is actually growing, Altrock maintains that politicians will continue to push back against taking the risk of further housing development, sighting that the long-term forecast for the population growth has been in recent history negative, even if studies show a bit of an upsurge now.

City Planning: an Approach

Returning to Lefebvre, let's take a brief look at how "representations of space" manifest themselves in the work of city planners. Uwe Altrock who has been working as a planner and teaching the subject for over 10 years says, "You can distinguish an urban planner in that

we normally work somehow for City Hall.” Altrock adds that what he’s interested in, is balancing the needs of people and improving cities. “On one hand, we have to understand the complexities of cities as scholars, and on the other hand, we have to find ways to develop them and identify recommendations.” There is an intrinsic conflict, Altrock says, between the observation analyses that comes from his social scientist colleagues, “who are there to warn, to tell people to think twice,” and from planners. “It’s their role to say ‘no,’ and we are in between—we also have to analyse and think better.” As a teacher, he prepares his students to identify viable strategies, because as planners you “always have to say ‘yes’ to something.” Urban regeneration, he continues, “in our understanding, has several major facets and one major facet in Germany, since the late 1990s, is called Socially Integrated Regeneration.”

This is a model based on the principle that you strengthen economically-depressed communities by upgrading the houses and their surroundings and by offering meeting places lead by community managers. It’s a plan that tries “to reduce the effect of stigmatisation” tied to areas that bear negative reputations. However, there can be problems with making a place “too nice,” Altrock tells me, because as socially integrated upgrading is not the major cause or reason for gentrification and displacement, it still somehow supports it. “In cities like Hamburg and Berlin, you have to avoid pouring in too much money, in order not to change it too much. And here, in Kassel, the situation is somehow in between. You can make a difference, initiate some positive change but I think it’s very difficult.” With socially-integrative urban regeneration you work in two ways: by traditional public investment (which tries to upgrade districts in a conventional way) and via neighbourhood management (a collaboration between social workers and planners) which “is trying to empower people.”

Neighbourhood managers create a platform to gather all different “ethnic minorities” to produce ideas of how to develop their neighbourhoods for themselves. They also go to primary schools

to speak to teachers and try to find ways of improving educational careers of migrant children. Furthermore, they work to obtain funding that will be allocated to the various project proposals, usually state money. Sometimes they coordinate street festivals, other times symposiums. Neighborhood managers will normally hire linguists who can translate for major sections of non-German speaking residents. "For example, a former student of mine works in Berlin at a neighbourhood management agency," says Altrock. "He always hires a Roma person, an Arab and a Turk. So he has three languages, plus German. But that doesn't cover it all." He recognises that not only will people get left out linguistically but also socially, like the homeless who they, "won't, or hardly, ever reach." "We know that they are there," he explains, "we read the studies by anthropologists or other people who try to find out how they live or what they need, but we won't be able to talk to them when it comes to planning actively." It's important, Altrock reiterates, to involve as many different groups of people as possible, "but we can't just categorise society into 250 different minorities or whatever. I think good planners take that into account while trying to address issues as broadly."

Conversation Partners



Uwe Altrock is Professor of Urban Regeneration and Planning at the University of Kassel since 2006. He was a Researcher at the Institute for Urban and Regional Planning at TU Berlin where he earned his doctorate and graduated with honours. He is a member of the Council for the European Urbanism (CEU), Urbanism

of European Dictatorships during the XXth Century Scientific Network (UEDXX) and the Deutsche Akademie für Städtebau und Landesplanung—German Academy for Urban and Regional Planning—(DASL).



Ayşe Güleç studied social education/ social work at the University of Kassel. The focus of her work is migrants and (inter-)cultural communication. She is involved in the development of self-organised initiatives in the areas of gender, migration and anti-racism. Güleç developed the documenta 12 advisory board and consequently became its spokeswoman. She became

a member of the Maybe Education Group at dOCUMENTA (13). She is currently responsible for community liaison in the office of the artistic director of documenta 14 in Kassel.



Till Timm is the lead guitarist of soul/punk band King Khan and the Shrines. In 1994 he, together with a partner, took over their favourite hangout Mutter-Bar, located on Bunsen Straße 15 in Nord Holland. Timm was an advocate against the closing of Das Haus, where for years, he frequently set up live shows of German and

international punk/underground bands. Although he's a "family man" nowadays, he still loves to go to shows from time to time to see some crazy, wild, local band perform nonconformist music.



Ali Timtik was born in western Armenia on the borders of Turkey. Leaving due to political oppression, he migrated to Germany when he was 19 in 1986. He opened his cafe on the corner of Westring and Gottschalk Straße in 2004, where he continues to use the space as an incubator for anti-racist and anti-fascist discourse. Since

2015 he has been a member of the local council in Nord Holland (Ortsbeirat) and is now the Deputy Mayor for the district.



Hannes Volz studied Town Planning, at the University of Kassel. He understands his current work as *Freiraumplaner*, a concept developed from the song *Room to Move*, by John Mayall—based on the condition that people should live their lives autonomously, unfettered by experts (planners or architects), authorities, or private companies. Volz

has served as the Mayor of the Ortsbeirat (local council) in Nord Holland since 2011. He continues to engage in local struggles to improve the living conditions on Holländische Straße.

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13. Kurdistan Workers' Party. To learn more visit Daren Butler's article, "Turkey's Erdogan courts nationalists, Kurds alike with hard line on PKK." in: <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-turkey-referendum-kurds-conflict/turkey-erdogan-courts-nationalists-kurds-alike-with-hard-line-on-pkk-idUSKBN1792D5> (accessed on: 20-01-2018).
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Conclusion: A More Vulnerable Relationship to Space

We have to recognise that there cannot be relationships unless there is commitment, unless there is loyalty, unless there is love, patience, persistence.

-Cornel West, *Breaking Bread*, 1991

Cultural spaces are not created *ex nihilo*; they have to be funded, socially supported and marketed. They create a community or are built from existing paradigms of “spatial practice.” The question as to how cultural workers can act in solidarity is no different from anyone seeking to ask themselves how they want to negotiate the struggles of everyday life. Asking what kind of city we want coincides with asking, as David Harvey puts it, “what kind of people we want to be, what kinds of social relations we seek, what relations to nature we cherish, what style of life we desire, what aesthetic values we hold.” Reclaiming the right to the city asks us to examine not only individual rights or “group access to the resources,” it demands the right “to change and reinvent the city more after our hearts’ desires. It is, moreover, a collective rather than an individual right, since reinventing the city inevitably depends upon the exercise of a collective power over the processes of urbanization.”¹ Gentrification is the process where capitalism, racism, and class intersect.

As David Madden and Peter Marcuse argue, to support a social movement that can transform the entire world, we should look at conditions towards strengthening and promoting the existing social fabric of economically vulnerable communities. The struggle for affordable housing (one of the fundamental conflicts in both neighbourhoods Kassel and Boyle Heights) is a demand for greater equality—to highlight the decommodification and de-financialisation of housing systems is a significant socially transformative demand.²

Artist Christoph Schäfer also demonstrates the city as the site for dissent production. In his book, *The City is Our Factory*, a visual essay in 158 drawings, he argues that if the city is regarded as a factory then it's simultaneously a site for new opportunities of resistance—isomorphic to the factory—as the place where the worker can go on strike.³

In both areas, the desire for business owned and frequented by residents is both a concern and a symbol of community empowerment. It is not only that galleries come or more “community” art spaces establish themselves; it is about who concretely uses these spaces and what social or class distinctions they enable or support. Today, much of what allows us to make class divisions is not only how much we own but how much we can owe, debt being a proxy to both wealth and catastrophe—in this way property is as much related to autonomy as is debt. In Kassel, the university's right to buy and build, as well as the capacity to receive public funds for expansion, is held as sacrosanct. PSSST gallery planned to lease the space rent-free for 20 years. Access and opportunity do not seem irrelevant questions—yet I would not presume there can be any coherence which would create an univocal position because this distorts the reality of difference. What I have come to recognise is my voice as it can relate and as it listens to a polyphony of experiences. I have come to appreciate the nuanced demands within the micro-political structure of neighborhoods where no one position speaks for all or claims complete amelioration.

Failure, Victory, or Transformation?

Freedom shouldn't be dependent upon my ability to exploit myself, as it has become within the paradigm of capitalism, equating democracy with purchasing power and debt opportunity. Capitalist crisis does not begin within art but, as Gregory Sholette argues in *Delirium and Resistance*, art can reflect and amplify its application. *Avant-garde*

struggles over representation, form, agency and community already connect with the demands of housing rights activists. As a cultural educator, I have grown to understand that if I seek solidarity with a community, I must acknowledge and work together with existing structures. In both Kassel and Los Angeles, there are spaces that are not being legitimised as either art or educational. There are practices of social reproduction that remain marginalised and a socially-engaged practice could start by searching, and working with, what exists before something new is created. Cultural workers whose interests lie in decommodified art spaces have important knowledge to share as the ground continues to shift around this discourse, and as the tools continue to be reimagined. Audre Lorde, in a widely quoted adage, cautions against methods which may only narrowly disrupt the parameters of change or which ultimately reproduce existing power relations. It is an appeal to rethink the exercise of criticality, put poetically and axiomatically—I quote the paragraph in its entirety. Though I am not breaking any ground by introducing it here, I have done so because of its relevance to this research.

“Those of us who stand outside the circle of this society’s definition of acceptable women; those of us who have been forged in the crucibles of difference—those of us who are poor, who are lesbians, who are Black, who are older—know that survival is not an academic skill. It is learning how to stand alone, unpopular and sometimes reviled, and how to make common cause with those others identified as outside the structures in order to define and seek a world in which we can all flourish. It is learning how to take our differences and make them strengths. For the master’s tools will never dismantle the master’s house. They may allow us temporarily to beat him at his own game, but they will never enable us to bring about genuine change. And this fact is only threatening to those women who still define the master’s house as their only source of support.”⁴

Contradiction versus coherence: how do you accomplish this; how do you not become the thing you hate and how do you constitute a practice antithetical to “the ends justify the means”? Perhaps, they

were never the master's tools to begin with, they were ours, the non-masters of the world. As Micah White writes, "Let's reclaim our stolen tools." He points to Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari's *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, tracing back tools that have been synonymous with the power of "the master" and argues how historically they were appropriated from the subjugated.

Giorgio Agamben, speaking of paradigms, talks of the impossibility of coherence, "it is thus impossible to clearly separate an example's paradigmatic character—its standing for all cases—from the fact that it is one case among others. As in a magnetic field, we are dealing not with extensive and scalable magnitudes but with vectorial intensities."⁵ This impossibility was witnessed through the numerous discussions I had with people from Kassel and Boyle Heights, who demonstrated the many entangled relationships and numerous power struggles. But situations intersected at many similar "vectorial intensities"—as listening, organising, visibility, mediation and representation. In Boyle Heights, rapid encroachment instituted by "pioneering" art spaces charged residents to rethink the role art was playing in their community. In Kassel, via caring and responsive mediation, populations of Nordstadt opened themselves to the mega institution that was interested in the area—not because of cheap rent—but because of cultural histories and narratives that were contrapuntal to d14's curatorial vision.

Our romantic notions of progress cannot rely on access to culture only, but the ability and power to shape it—autonomy. What I have learned from my interviewees is critical practice involves a consistent reassessing and reimagining, plus an earnest commitment to listening and involving people who perhaps speak too softly, or who are often spoken about but remain marginalised. bell hooks might call this "radical openness"—qualities she describes as generosity of spirit, courage, and the willingness to reconsider long-standing beliefs.⁶ The "concrete demands of change" many times are in conflict with theoretical ideas of equality, as her colleague Jim Hunt states from his

personal experience.⁷ What my research has helped me understand better is that “commitment to complex analysis” requires “the letting go of wanting everything to be simple.”⁸ Let’s be more curious about each other, let’s imagine that we do not have the answers but can somehow engage in a process of learning together. Let’s follow such affirmations as “recognize everyone else’s complexity as much as I do my own” and “provide care as much as I provide critique,” formulated by gender nonconforming performance artist, Alok Vaid-Menon.⁹

We should not exit the conversation simply because we haven’t found the perfect strategies to demonstrate our commitment to solidarity with disenfranchised communities. As an educator and artist, I know how my own situation is under enormous pressure, and like other working class populations, find my position more and more precarious, and increasingly pessimistic. After a weekend of binge-watching UK series *The Crown*, I finally forgave myself when part of a speech given by Queen Elizabeth II in 1957 felt relevant to my work. In it, she says, “we need a kind of courage that can withstand the subtle corruption of the cynics.” I would say I have to enact the ethos of that by withstanding the subtle corruption of my own cynicism, as well. She continues, “it has always been easy to hate and destroy. To build and to cherish is much more difficult.” The Queen here is speaking to deference and trust in the monarchy, not precisely my *cause célèbre*. Nonetheless, by appropriating that sentiment, let it stretch to cover my hopefulness in the structure of institutions, large or small, and the tenacity to fulfil their promises—as well as promises I have asked of myself—and not to withdraw from the tiring work of seeking change.

Seeking Horizontality

Belgian artist François Hers wrote *The New Patrons—Les Nouveaux commanditaires* as a “sort of manifesto.” In the form of a protocol, the document defined the role of all “actors” concerned in the production of art. I am not in agreement with some of Hers’ notions, one being that the new patrons are needed to continue in the spirit of art since the Renaissance that has “allowed the conquest of the individual’s autonomy.” We know from John Berger’s seminal work *Ways of Seeing* how art production was historically a means for glorifying one’s wealth, revealing: “oil painting, before it was anything else, was a celebration of private property. As an art form, it derived from the principle that *you are what you have*,” writes Berger in 1972.¹⁰ Art has and continues to be an assertion of power (of which today’s stupefying \$56 billion art market can attest).¹¹ In Hers’ and the late Xavier Douroux publication, *Art Without Capitalism*, further clarifying the idea of “The New Patrons,” I align myself with its optimistic strategies. It’s at times a bit too utopic, yet nevertheless, concrete methods with which to play.

Hers opines that engagement and awareness of agency by “actors” would form the new patrons of art, and lead to compensation for artworks inside a model of community-driven negotiation—a *mélange* of public grants and private donations. Hers writes, “this Protocol offers anyone in civil society who so wishes, either alone or in partnership with others, the means to commission a work of art and to legitimise an investment in its creation, requested from the community.”¹² The “means” here referred to are not only tools for financial realisation, but also in three distinct roles—mediator, artist and individual or community. *Les Nouveaux commanditaires* offers a blueprint for structural organisation, knowledge production, and creation, which is not a one-size-fits-all approach but a negotiated terrain, dependent on place and circumstance, facilitated by the people in each role. The mediator works at the intersection of

producer and curator. They take the time to figure out what each patron would like to see from the project, what role they see for themselves and some desires they may have. The patron is the town, village, or individual wanting to work with an artist. They procure funding, as well as galvanise support. The artist works directly with patrons and the mediator to negotiate their concept. The mutual exchanges incorporate myriad conflicts, as well as a steep learning curve for all participants. Intuitions, objections and reasoning are just fractions of this multidimensional task, yet the projects manage to materialise. And though the process is nowhere near simple, anecdotes by participants¹³ affirm a gratitude for the experience and an ownership of the project—an intention written into the protocol is that “the notion of author is not limited to only one individual.” So why do we need “new patrons”? Precisely because the privatisation of culture has created new precarities and pitted individuals against one another, not only in the currency of art, creating hierarchies of wealth, but additionally in the role institutions play locally.

Art Without Capitalism is a critique of the financial situation that affords less and less freedom, for all people, and although art did not create the crisis of capitalism it does reflect and cooperate structurally, such as with its relationship to processes of gentrification. The New Patrons Protocol has been implemented by numerous organisations, including Alexander Koch who launched *Die Neue Auftraggeber* in Germany. And by the Fondation de France, established in 1991, which has since initiated hundreds of art pieces with the assistance of a network of mediators in contemporary art, as well as public and private partners. What could a gallery, a museum, or even a university look like in the ideology brought forth by *Les Nouveaux commanditaires*? I would imagine a bit tousled, bunglesome—it could be nice—more experimental, more self-critical and less guarded.

Cultural workers may see themselves as allies of diversity and equality—working within the same modes of precarity that make them vulnerable as well—however, they are increasingly entangled

within economic/social systems that also rub elbows with the dominant elite. Artists Heather M. O'Brien, Christina Sanchez Juarez and Betty Marin propose an anti-gentrification guide, which takes a look at alternatives to complicity. "We see art as part of how people struggle and resist in life. Art becomes alienating when entities and individuals refuse to acknowledge their personal and structural impacts that contribute to gentrification." Their affirmations are marked by five objectives listed below—prompting the public to take responsibility, while validating art as an essential social function.¹⁴

1. Becoming involved in housing struggles—especially if we are part of a more "desirable" gentrifying class—is crucial.
2. As artists, we have to educate ourselves, especially considering that we might have racial, educational, or class privilege compared to our neighbors.
3. It is imperative to understand the need to find other ways of dealing with conflict or safety issues besides calling the police, given who the police serve and who the police jail and kill with impunity.
4. As artists who participate in and support exhibitions, we must interrogate the spaces we choose to enter and work with.
5. We must choose between prioritizing our own individualistic artistic careers or prioritizing the dismantling of oppressive structures.
6. We must ask about the power of art spaces to decide who is included in the first place.

Accountability in the Arts:

What are some examples of artistic practices that addresses these entanglements? The following two socially-engaged projects come not from a place of "benevolence"¹⁵ but from an artistic practice in answer to trauma within their community—and as such find themselves in

an anti-gentrification model. They engage at the intersection of art, enrichment, and preservation, the latter being my point to include them as positive examples. Project Row Houses and the Grandhotel Cosmopolis are self-described as being influenced by Joseph Beuys and his theoretical hypothesis of “social sculpture.” During the 1970s, Beuys gave numerous lectures on his utopic vision “to build a social organism as a work of art,” declaring, “every human being is an artist” and that “only art is capable of dismantling the repressive effects of a senile social system.”¹⁶ Formulating the notion that art engenders social transformation by viewing every person as an artist extends the agency of all members of society as capable of performing this transformation. Utopia has become synonymous with “naïve” in its pejorative interpretation. However, these projects come as close to a praxis of coherence as I would desire to emulate. They are long-term and community-centred, while addressing societal issues—art in dialogue with community, and civic engagement “as” an artistic practice. I would suggest the spaces are creating more a heterotopia, in the sense of Michel Foucault, and the way they disrupt the logic of normative market structures. They somehow operate within their own set of unspoken rules, values and aesthetics yet “presuppose a system of opening and closing that both isolates them and makes them penetrable.”¹⁷

The Grandhotel Cosmopolis:

In 2011, The Grandhotel Cosmopolis was developed as a concept by local artists and activists who wanted to initiate a cultural node that would accommodate the needs of refugees, artists, tourists, musicians, and migrants—via providing long or short-term housing, artist studios, open workspaces, communal dining and a venue for cultural events. Volunteers, along with a small contracting company, rehabilitated the property and designed each lodging to be unique—incorporating murals and upcycled furniture. One

member described it as comfortable but not luxurious—simple and made with care.¹⁸ Susa Gunzner, Stef Maldener, and Susi Weber, members of the artist collective Kunstcontainer, at the Grandhotel Cosmopolis, were interviewed by Anna Frech, who inquired about the mission of the hotel and how it began. They explained that the idea grew from the circumstance of local conditions—insufficient affordable accommodation for travellers and artist studios, as well as a problematic social structure which isolates asylum seekers from German citizens. Using their terminology, patrons are “guests with and without asylum” who encounter one another in shared leisure and working activities. Situated in the southern town of Augsburg, Germany, which has a high migration rate, over 40%,¹⁹ the location confronted the growing shortage of housing for refugees, and policies of segregation by fostering encounters between asylum seekers and citizens—furthering their mission for critical and cultural exchange.

The building, an abandoned former nursing home, is owned by a German Christian charity called Diakonisches Werk, renting floors to both the Swabian government, who facilitate the district’s asylum centres, and the rest of the complex to Grandhotel Cosmopolis. As such, the establishment is both an official centre for asylum seekers, as well as a hotel and cultural space. All residents and guests can participate in the cultural happenings, hotel business management and daily chores, according to their possibilities and skills.²⁰ They utilise a structure of organising that is always changing and negotiates the needs of all people involved—some who have been there from the beginning and also newer actors. Members of Kunstcontainer stress that the circumstances which brings an asylum seeker to the hotel is not the same as those who come of their own volition. Therefore, the collective started to address such differences by founding *Wilde 132*—focussing on “the problems of the asylum legislation and the associated challenges, on the individual level as well as on the political level.” They provide translation and research services, as well as mediation. Subsequently, they claim that, compared with “other asylum housing facilities, [they] have quite a low conflict rate among

the different ethnic groups encountering each other”²¹ Altogether, Grandhotel offers “56 beds for ‘hotel guests with asylum,’ 44 beds for ‘hotel guests without asylum,’ and 13 studios/work rooms.” Some people implement a work-to-stay programme, while others pay the asking rate for rooms—anywhere between €20 to €60 a night for ‘hotel guests without asylum.’ Additionally, there are exchange stamps, which are fungible for hotel meals or used as tickets for events. With continued financial support from private donations, the German Federal Cultural Foundation and newly supporting Robert Bosch Foundation, they held a two-week peace conference in 2015. Coordinators formulated workshops around 15 areas of interest—shaped with and by participants within an open-ended organisational structure—that included subject matter like farming, textile fabrication, music, dance, activism, and German asylum law. The event’s title page succinctly states, “Our goal was and is to shape a more fair society that includes everyone.”²²

Project Row Houses

Conceived as a social sculpture in 1993, Project Row Houses was initiated by seven African-American artists—James Bettison, Bert Long, Jr., Jesse Lott, Floyd Newsum, Bert Samples, and George Smith, along with the project’s founder Rick Lowe. With the help of DiverseWorks,²³ they were able to secure a grant from the National Endowment for the Arts,²⁴ together buying 22 dilapidated shotgun houses in the Third Ward of Houston, Texas. Together with local organisations and volunteers, Project Row Houses helped revitalise the community by creating space for African-American artists, as well as transforming the once symbol of poverty into an emblem of solidarity and a means for social transformation. In 2004, they received added funding for \$150,000 from the Ford Foundation—a decade later, Lowe was awarded the MacArthur “Genius” Fellowship,

supplying him \$625,000, over a five year period. This funding, as well as donations over the years from various individuals and partner foundations and corporations, has allowed more resources to sustain and advance the project.²⁵ “When we started, it was on some level to honor the work of John Biggers, who gave us a different narrative of what a shotgun is and needs,” Lowe said in an interview with the *Houston Chronicle*. “It has a much broader value to the community. It has become a vehicle of change and a symbol of the hopes and dreams of a community.”²⁶ In 2003, the Row Houses Community Development Council was established, providing housing for single mothers and low-income households. The council also manages three commercial buildings and houses used for arts programming.²⁷ Additional activities include tutoring and educational support, six-month artist residencies, exhibitions, a food co-op and community market, and after school courses for children.

The design characteristics of these houses date back to West African architectural form—“brought to the US via the slave trade—first through the Caribbean up to New Orleans and then across the country.”²⁸ Acting as cultural preservation not only in function but in form as well, “the shotgun house expresses the enduring social values and cultural traditions of generations of African Americans.”²⁹ Rows of houses sit side by side with a little patch of grass at the posterior of parallel houses allowing for intimate social spaces, without fences or natural borders, only some large trees that provide shade.

Taking Root Without Taking Over

Unterm pflaster liegt der strand.
(Underneath the pavement lies the beach.)
-Attributed to the Situationist movement

This thesis confronted me with the attitudes, gestures and practices of people living within contested spaces—many who were asking, “who does the contesting, who is listening and who gets to, ultimately, do what they want?” Irit Rogoff said in a lecture, “every time you make something visible, you make something invisible.” As this research began as a desire to understand how I could be more coherent, I have yet to investigate what I have subjected to invisibility. As an educator, amassing knowledge and gathering it to begin a dialogue is a cornerstone of pedagogy. The message is in the process and the material, even if acting and researching are separate threads of the same braid. However, I understand that so much has been left out, and that is the continued work of my growing criticality. The sentiment may sound sentimental or quixotic and hard to apply to the logistics of everyday life. We will see, there are multiple ways to fashion resistance to the culprit/victim binary and there is an “importance of struggling for an open-ended conception of plurality”³⁰

An essay by Anthony Huberman, titled *Take Care*, questioned the conduct and working methods of contemporary alternative spaces and compared them to their large-scale counterparts, stating, “while these mainstream or commercial structures might take risks with what they show, few take risks with how they work.”³¹ Referencing the 10-point doctrine, *How to Work Better*, by Swiss artists Peter Fischli and David Weiss, Huberman takes on the task of reinterpreting the original concept. He proposes a curatorial behaviour that could

“embrace a more vulnerable relationship to knowledge,”³² and I would extend it as to perform the added task of proposing a more vulnerable relationship to space and community. It is a lovely set of assertions, titled *How to Behave Better*:

1. Remember That You Don't Know
2. Learn to Care
3. Say Thank You
4. Wear Your Heart on Your Sleeve
5. Insist on Talking Face to Face
6. Follow the Life of an Idea
7. Speak Frankly
8. Take Your Time
9. Be Maladjusted
10. Toast

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6. hooks, bell. "Teaching Community: A Pedagogy of Hope." New York: Routledge, 2003, p. 110.
7. Ibid. p. 78.
8. Ibid.
9. Vaid-Menon, Alok. "New Years Resolutions" in: <https://bit.ly/2vdgWMq> (accessed on: 20-02-2018).
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11. Larger than the national GDP of over 180 countries. See online at: <http://statisticstimes.com/economy/countries-by-gdp.php> (accessed on: 20-11-2017).
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benevolence. If practitioners do not look to address their own position then action is steeped in a condescending paternalism. Spivak: "I was saying that you might want to entertain the notion that you cannot consider all other subjects and that you should look at your own subjective investment in the narrative that is being produced. You see, that is something that I will continue to repeat, it is not an invitation to be benevolent towards others." Spivak, Gayatri Chakravorty. "The Post-modern Condition: The End of Politics?" in: Sarah Harasym (ed.) "The post-colonial critic: interviews, strategies and dialogues." New York: Routledge, Chapman and Hall, Inc. 1990, p. 29.

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